

Gender, Culture and Development:
In the Paradigm of Gross National Happiness in Bhutan

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ABSTRACT

This study of women in Bhutan is based on the country's unique development concept known as Gross National Happiness (GNH). Whereas in most countries, a western approach to development concentrates on increasing Gross Domestic Product to improve a country's economy, Bhutan follows a different approach based on improving the general well-being of the people. The thesis argues that Bhutan has relegated Gross Domestic Product to the background where it can be used as a means to enhance "happiness" but not as an overall goal of development and that the impacts of this on women require separate study.

There are four elements that form the core of the Gross National Happiness concept: good governance, environmental conservation, cultural preservation and socio-economic development. This thesis has focused on only two elements of the GNH concept, questioning the nature of cultural preservation and socio-economic development. This is because cultural preservation is one of the areas that affects women particularly. In the path of development, many socio-economic policies inadvertently discriminate against women although their intentions are gender neutral. Thus, the overall purpose of this thesis is to explore women's position, especially in the education sector and the impact of tradition and culture on Bhutanese women. The relationship between women in Bhutan and the government policy of preserving culture is analysed in order to determine if there is conflict between preserving culture and sustaining happiness against the backdrop of the fast pace of economic development.

The methodological approach for this thesis is both qualitative and quantitative. Because of the limited written material on Bhutan, it was important to talk to members of the public to explore general perceptions, feelings and opinions relating to government policies and the impact of development activities and culture on their lives and also to bring in unofficial perspectives. Participants consisted of twenty households in the village and twenty-two participants from the urban area to address urban/rural differences. Literacy is less in rural areas as is access to information and exposure to western influences. Official documents, newspapers, on-line discussion forums, school curricula and films were also drawn on to explore the role of culture and the impact of development policies on the Bhutanese people.

The thesis concludes that cultural preservation, particularly when followed uncritically, remains a major obstacle to women's empowerment towards achieving their development goals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, the developmental policies of Bhutan¹ were primarily concerned with improving the infrastructure, such as roads and social services. In the 1970s, Bhutan introduced the concept of Gross National Happiness as a part of its development policies identifying several important areas as essential elements in the overall direction of the developmental process. In other words, Bhutan's development would be measured and evaluated not simply in terms of Gross National Product but in terms of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Four priority areas were identified as the pillars of the GNH concept. These four pillars are preservation of culture, good governance, environment conservation and socio-economic development. The concept of GNH is to redefine the objective of development itself and potentially the means to achieve development. The idea was that development should serve the well-being of the people and that economic development is only a means but not an end in itself (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007: xi).

The main aim of Bhutanese development policy is to maintain a balance between modernisation, culture and tradition². It is argued that, because of its small size, Bhutan has used tradition and culture as a weapon to safeguard its independence against the giant cultures of India and China, between which Bhutan is sandwiched. Because of the size of its neighbours, a sense of insecurity is constantly in the Bhutanese minds. As such, the promotion of the country's unique culture has

¹ Bhutan is a landlocked country sandwiched between Tibet to the north and India to the south. It has an area of 38,394 square kilometres, divided into twenty districts with a population of 672,425. Out of this population 37,443 are a floating population representing expatriate workers mostly from India who work as labourers in the construction industry and hydro-electric projects, including other foreigners working for international organizations such as the United Nations, World Wildlife Fund. Its physical geography consists of steep, high mountains that rise from 200 metres above sea level to 7,000 metres in the high north mountains. 72.5% of the area is under forest cover and the law of the kingdom requires that 60% of the area must remain under forest for all time. The climate varies from hot sub tropical in the south to cold alpine slopes in the north. Human settlement is confined to the northern interior, southern and central part of the country but there are some nomads and tribes who live in the mountains raising cattle and Yaks. Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion of the country, but the Hindu faith dominates in the south. Society is mainly divided into three groups, Zhung (monarchy and bureaucracy), Dratsang (religious community), and Misey (people). The national language is Dzongkha, and there are three main ethnic groups. The Sharchops of the east, the Ngalops of the west (who are descendants of Tibetans who migrated as early as the fifth century) and the people of Nepalese origins in the south who settled towards the end of the nineteenth century (Bhutan Government. 2004-2005)

² See Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) (2004-2005b) for the official introduction to GNH.

become an intense concern for the people and the government alike (Ueda, 2003, Priesner³, 1996 and Basu, 1996). In the light of this, preservation of culture is considered one of the strongest weapons to resist outside influences. However, culture is said to play an important part in defining gender roles and women are often positioned as the guardian of cultural boundaries. Moreover, the emphasis on cultural preservation is confusing for the Bhutanese people because beliefs and practices are not segregated. From the pilot study I have carried out, it seems as if the government is indirectly advocating preserving even the negative aspects of traditional practices and beliefs, while in theory the emphasis is placed on the positive aspects. This thesis will be concerned with exploring the relationship between gender equity and cultural preservation in the development paradigm of Gross National Happiness. More specifically, I wish to focus on the extent to which culture enhances or obstructs the social position of women in Bhutan following development.

Research Question

The document entitled The National Commission for Women and Children (Planning Commission, NCWC, 2007) singles out the employment problem as the main socio-economic development problem for the women of Bhutan. But what about women's role in the environment conservation process, their contribution of unpaid labour, their reproductive roles to add to the human resource of the country, and all the unconditional extra attention and sacrifices poured into families and societies so that the economy can keep going? The denial of voices for women to have their efforts recognized is an extreme form of inequality for women. Thus, in an effort to preserve culture under the GNH policy, women are being placed in a situation of conflict between preserving culture and socio-economic enhancement. In the light of this, the main question for this research thesis can be derived as:

What is the position of Bhutanese women in the socio-economic development process in the pursuit of Gross National Happiness? How far does culture influence gender equality and hence influence development?

³ Stefan Priesner was a United Nations Development Programme officer in the capital of Bhutan, Thimphu.

Aims and Objectives

It has been interesting to note that despite socio-economic development being one of the pillars of GNH, there has been no paper presented in local and international conferences in Bhutan in 2004 and Canada in 2007 on the role of women in economic development process.

In all its formulation and implementation of development plans, programmes and policies, the Bhutan government claimed that these policies maintained a gender-neutral position (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007: 1). However, gender-neutral policies often hide gender biases when compared with gender awareness analysis of the same intervention (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996). For example, governments providing technological help to boost agricultural production would end up favouring males rather than females when the equipment provided is meant to reduce the workload of men rather than women.

The aim of this research is to partly study the position of Bhutanese women in the socio economic development scenario in relation to both the government's plans and policies of gender development approach and partly study the impact of cultural preservation on women. This is because the Bhutanese government has to play the role of maintaining a balance between rapid modernisation and following its GNH principles of holding on to its culture. Thus, this thesis will study the problematic relationship between socio-economic development and cultural preservation. Comparison studies will also be made to find out if new gender mainstreaming policies have been actually implemented and what realities are faced by women, through analysis of my research feedback including questionnaires, literature and documents collected from Bhutan.

Literature by feminists will also be used as a framework, especially Kabeer's social approach method (e.g. Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996). In spite of the lack of discussion on gender discrimination in the international conferences, the government of Bhutan set up a separate department called the National Commission for Women and Children (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB 2007) in 2005. This is because Bhutan has become a member of many international organizations including the UNDP, World Bank, ADB, CEDAW and others whose aims and objectives include improving the condition of women all over the world. Not only that,

as more and more people become literate and are exposed to western influences where women are treated as an important human resource, Bhutan has come to respect the rights of women and on its own initiatives has approved a number of NGOs, such as the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB), Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW), the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), REWA (Bhutanese word for hope) and the Tarayana Foundation. While other NGOs have been responsible for looking after the welfare of women in relation to victims of domestic violence, and create income-generating activities, the purpose of NCWC is to provide a framework for the government to include gender in its formulation of plans and policies using the GNH philosophy as the guideline. NCWC along with many other government representatives from other departments and NGOs developed a framework and identified seven critical areas in need of action (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007):

1. Good Governance
2. Economic development (focus on employment)
3. Education and Training
4. Health
5. Ageing, Mental Health and Disabilities
6. Violence against women
7. Prejudices and Stereotypes

Women and Good Governance policy: Besides transparency and accountability, good governance also has to be concerned with promotion and achievement of gender equality that shows equal representation of women in public decision-making participation. The number of women's representatives in public posts needs to be studied to see if there is equal benefit for women. This issue of good governance and the approach used by the Bhutanese government is discussed in chapter two under the general overview of Bhutan.

Women and Socio-economic development: This focuses on the rate of women's participation in the employment sector, including the number of women in the industrial area and the agricultural sector. Women's access to credit to set up their own businesses and their access to training programmes offered by the government for the agricultural sector need to be studied to

see if the plans and policies provide gender equality. One of the major focuses will be on the income earning capacity of the women. Women's access to education is also very important to enable them to acquire the necessary skills to be employed. The study of girls' enrolment rate in schools would be a very strong indicator of this. It will also be important to study the enrolment rate starting from the primary stage until higher education, including the number of dropouts and the reasons responsible for these dropouts. Much of the low rate of employment for women is attributed to the late start of modern education. Once modern education was introduced, parents preferred sending sons to schools rather than girls mainly because of long distance to travel to schools, daughters looking after elderly parents, inheriting properties and some of the general perceptions that women are less capable of studying than men. Questions relating to women's literacy, the gender gap in literacy and government policies on education in relation to this have been examined in chapter three under education and employment.

Women and Socio-cultural perception: In the process of preserving traditions and cultural practices, it sometimes work against women in a such a way that women are deprived of their freedom of mobility, life choices including access to education, employment opportunities and governance. The cultural perceptions that limit Bhutanese women in pursuing their goals in their lives and the way are women negatively affected by these cultural practices would make an interesting study. The aspects of traditional beliefs and culture that empower or disempower Bhutanese women are discussed in chapter four under culture, gender and development.

Besides the critical areas identified by NCWC, the five-year plans' policies on women will be examined to discover new areas identified by NCWC.

Results

Because of Bhutan government's influential nature of its administration system (this will be established in the overview of Bhutan in chapter 2), this research will explore the extent to which the state of Bhutan ensures that women are included in its GNH development concept and how GNH is used to implement programmes that benefit women. As culture is one of the most important pillars of GNH, I wish to investigate the role of Bhutanese women in preserving culture. This leads to the question of how women can be empowered if women are placed in a gendered way in pursuit of GNH and in the process of preserving culture.

Another aim of this research work will be to evaluate existing gender policies, bring out hidden gender biases and recommend changes to policy makers to further reduce gender inequalities and improve the quality of Bhutanese women's lives. This will be done by examining gender gaps in the education sector, finding reasons for the gap and finally assessing the impact of education on women's employment.

Background on Gross National Happiness (GNH)

This thesis touches upon the concept of gross national happiness in every chapter. Therefore, I have found it necessary to provide a background on GNH for readers, which will serve as a reference for discussion related to GNH in each chapter.

“Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product. Bhutan needs to ensure that prosperity is shared across society that is balanced against preserving cultural traditions, protecting the environment and maintaining a responsive government” (King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, 1974)

The GNH concept is a development concept applied in Bhutan, which emphasises spiritual well-being and happiness and not economic growth alone. The king of Bhutan picked on the differences between Bhutan and other developing countries early on in his reign. In achieving its goal of social well being, Bhutan had certain advantages over the more developed and developing countries. Firstly, it had been so remote from the rest of the world in terms of communication and transport and had the advantage of not being influenced by globalisation policies. At the time that major developments were happening in the outside world, Bhutan had remained stable throughout. In 1929 when the economic crisis of the Great Depression occurred, Bhutan was not affected because it did not yet have a monetarized economy. Bhutan was not drawn in the Second World War because it was not politically integrated into South Asia. It was not drawn into anti colonial movements typical of post World War II because Bhutan was never colonized. Because of Bhutan's non-engagement in all these activities, '*Isolation*' remained a powerful instrument in remaining independent and free of outside influences for so long (Mancall, 2004:6).

Secondly, development through Five Year Plans started in 1961 and the country had enough opportunity to learn from the mistakes of others; and finally the poverty of the country did not

give the opportunity to define wealth objectively (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007: xii). Bhutan was ranked 137th in terms of Gross Domestic Product by the UNDP in 2006 (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007: ix). These three factors allowed Bhutan to consider its future according to the national resources available.

The happiness concept is not something new to Bhutan. It was mentioned as early as the late 1960s when the third king expressed his view on development as “*making the people prosperous and happy*” and this notion was highlighted by the king on the occasion of Bhutan’s admission to the United Nations, considered one of the most important events in Bhutanese history (Priesner, 1996:28). This vision was further elaborated by the fourth king at his coronation in 1974:

“our country’s policy is to consolidate our sovereignty to achieve economic self reliance, prosperity and happiness for our country and the people”.

According to Priesner, both prosperity and happiness occupy a place of importance in Bhutanese development policies but there is more emphasis on the latter (Priesner, 1996:29).

The first ever-international conference on GNH took place in the capital city of Bhutan, Thimphu, 2004. The Centre for Bhutan Studies organised the conference with approval from the government of Bhutan and its intention was to explore ways to provide a proper definition to the concept of GNH. As the conference organizers put it:

“the entire purpose of the conference was to explore the content of the concept of GNH and the issues raised by it, both theoretically and operationally” (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004a:x).

Much time was spent on wrestling with ideas to define GNH but a definite conclusion could not be reached or thought of. But it was a milestone in the history of international discourse on the topic as it brought people from all over the world to discuss the same topic (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007:xii). The second conference was held in Nova Scotia, Canada in 2005. This conference concentrated on looking for a direction to work out the concept by building on the first conference and seeking to operationalize the concept through varieties of experiences and experiments from around the world (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007:xiii).

From the above two conferences various concepts of what happiness means emerged. According to the Prime Minister of Bhutan, GNH stands for the holistic needs of human beings, both

physical and mental well-being that seeks to complement inner skills of happiness with outer circumstances and has to stress collective happiness rather than that of individuals.

GNH addresses problems:

“that can be addressed directly through public policies in which happiness becomes an explicit criterion in projects and programmes” (Thinley, 2007:3).

On the other hand, Kinley Dorji, a journalist argued that a critical element of GNH should be empowerment of the people, the basis of democracy in which the media provided the people with a means to make informed decisions and hence effective media was the answer. Dorji and Pek⁴ further argued that:

“the Bhutanese media has the responsibility to resist and provide alternatives to global trends in the media, just as GNH is a response to globalisation and global interpretation of development” (Dorji and Pek, 2007:86).

From a perspective of Buddhism, Tashi argues that GNH cannot be achieved unless Buddhist philosophy is fully incorporated and practised by every citizen because cultivation of happiness is seen as central to Buddhist philosophy and practices, which prescribe limitless methods to achieve individual or collective happiness (Tashi, 2004:483). Another researcher describes GNH as improving the lives of the vulnerable through the services of welfare NGOs (Tshering, 2005).

Happiness is often viewed as a highly personalized and dynamic situation, but recent growing literature about happiness research suggests that individual happiness can be measured and its determinants quantified. The Centre for Bhutan studies has carried out studies attempting to measure and quantify happiness in terms of well-being and life satisfaction in ‘*Gross National Happiness and Material Welfare in Bhutan and Japan*’ (2007). The study shows that the main components perceived to be sources of happiness and well-being are financial security, good health and well-being of the family. People in the rural areas seem to put good health and well-being over and above financial security whereas it was the reverse in urban areas. Social support availability, spirituality, positive emotions, calmness and contentment were positively related to higher levels of subjective well-being, whereas mental health and stress, guilt, sadness and resentment were negatively related (Choden et al, 2007:77-78).

⁴ Siok Sian Pek is a freelance writer living in Bhutan, married to Kinely Dorji, the journalist mentioned above.

Easterlin (2002) suggested that the factors determining happiness could be similar for a group or class of people based on living conditions, family and wealth. Thus, an explanation is demanded as to why economic growth does not raise subjective well-being in spite of the positive relationship between well-being and income. He also suggests that happiness increases with income in cross sectional terms but not over a period of time (Easterlin, 2002:ix-x). Easterlin associated unhappiness (negatively) more strongly with unemployment than inflation and positively with being married, white and having a higher income, education and employment. Finally, Easterlin suggested that the concept of happiness would depend on individual's perception of a good life and preferences. For example a sweeper in India who earns a monthly income of US\$ 13 per month would be happier if he could afford decent food for his family whereas a Lawyer in the United States would be more satisfied if he could have proper recreation such as music lessons and family trips (Easterlin, 2002:31). Easterlin has examined the relationship between happiness and GDP both across countries and within countries according to average income and well-being through time

Methodology

Introduction

The main aim of using all the resources mentioned below is to attempt to answer questions that are crucial to analysing gender differences in Bhutan in terms of women's participation in decision-making, education, employment and most importantly, the role of culture and its impact on women by addressing the following questions in the following chapters:

- Do women in Bhutan have equal participation in the administrative affairs of the government?
- How much importance is given to educating women by the government and what is the enrolment rate of boys and girls in schools both in rural and urban areas?
- How does the legal system protect women's rights?
- What are the employment ratios of males and females in all sectors?
- Is equal opportunity given to women in terms of distribution of resources?
- Are there any gender specific policies that the government has put into place since the conception of GNH?

- How do women feel about traditional and contemporary culture? What do they understand about cultural change?
- What is the role of culture in Bhutan and how does it impact on women?

The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore the development policies of Bhutan in the paradigm of Gross National Happiness, women's position in this development policy and the traditional and cultural impact on Bhutanese women. The GNH concept is supported by four pillars namely, socio-economic development, environmental conservation, good governance and preservation of culture. Covering all four pillars is a vast subject to explore, so therefore, only two pillars are picked as the subjects of discussion in this thesis, socio-economic development and cultural preservation.

Socio economic development is related to women because human resource development becomes an important part of economic growth. This relationship between women and socio economic growth is explored in terms of women's participation in education and employment. Culture is another area where gender relations are shaped through traditional practices and religious beliefs. Gender identities and relations are critical aspects of culture because culture shapes the way people lead their lives in societies and the wider community. Bhutanese culture in relation to development principles and particularly its relation to Bhutanese women are discussed in detail because cultural preservation seems to be a major area in which Bhutanese development policies differ from western development policies, and is considered as one of the most important elements to uphold the GNH concept.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach for this paper is both qualitative and quantitative. Because of the limited number of written materials on Bhutan, it was important that I study public opinion on the role of culture and the impact of development policies on the Bhutanese people. However, it must be mentioned that very recently, the Bhutan Research Centre (The Centre for Bhutan Studies) has started to analyse data it has already gathered on similar research topics related to GNH. For my own thesis, I arranged to interview 20 households in a village and as many people as possible in the urban area, i.e. the capital city, Thimphu (see appendix 2).

Participants consisted of twenty households in the village and 22 participants from the urban area. The reason for using participants from both rural and urban areas was to explore general perceptions, feelings and opinions relating to government policies and the impact of development activities and culture on their lives and also to bring in unofficial perspectives. The segregation between the urban and the rural area is because of the literacy gap, the gap in access to information and differences in exposure to western influences and the opinions of the literate and illiterate vary a lot.

I was successful with the village interviews as I visited them during their time off from daily farm work. The only problem was that the villagers were illiterate and they were uncomfortable with tape-recording of their conversations. I had to interview them in Dzongkha (Bhutanese language) and note down every aspect of the conversation in English word for word. I had also briefed all the participants about the objectives of these research interviews. Educated people in the urban areas understood the objectives of the interview but asked not to be identified. However, the people in the rural areas were illiterate and had no idea about ethics in research procedures. Even when I explained the purpose of the interviews, they had no idea what I was talking about as they had never faced similar interviews before or had not heard about ethics. Therefore, in order to maintain a fair position I treated all the participants as anonymous segregating them only by the places they lived in, i.e. urban and rural.

I spent two and half months in Bhutan trying to gather participants for my interviews. Two months was spent in the village observing the rural way of life, farm work, the household division of labour and gathering as much information as possible by participating in village gatherings at festivals, religious ceremonies and talking to people whenever possible. I did not interview any young children because some of them were school-going children, and others were running around involved in household work and were not willing to talk without their parents around.

In the urban area, I moved from offices to offices looking for willing participants who were working for the Government, Non-Governmental Organizations, Businesses or International Organizations. Many of the participants had no time to sit for an interview but were willing to provide feedback on a questionnaire I provided. Most of the responses were received through

email once I came back to New Zealand from Bhutan after my fieldwork. These interviews helped me with people's opinions in answering questions such as what they thought of GNH both in rural and urban areas, were they satisfied with government services, what did Bhutanese culture do to gender relations, is happiness so important, what is the role of religion in their lives? Because of the lack of academic writers on gender in Bhutan, I used many works by theorists such as Gita Sen, Yuval Davis, Caroline Moser, Amartya Sen and Naila Kabeer among others to analyse relations between gender and culture and development.

For the quantitative sections, I used many government reports to obtain a large amount of reliable data published by the government of Bhutan. These materials include records and data from five-year plans to study development policies in the light of gender roles in development, National Statistical Board data collected by the Government on various issues such as tourism, health, crimes and employment and Population and Census reports to obtain data on literacy rate, sex ratio, education enrolment and population statistics. Other materials have been used as the following section illustrates.

Newspaper Articles

The news stories came from one national paper, *Kuensel* (1967), which was published twice in a week and daily from May 2009. *Kuensel* circulates around 30,000 copies a week and has an average readership of 130,000. This paper is printed both in English and Dzongkha (national language) and reaches a wider range of audience especially for those who cannot read English. The online website was put up in 1999 when the internet first came to Bhutan and by 2006, *Kuensel* had an average of 3,000 visitors daily and more than 15,000 registered members. The daily news update and active discussion forum has made it one of the most popular websites in Bhutan. *Kuensel* now faces competition from three private papers, *Bhutan Observer* (2006), *Bhutan Times* (2006) and *Bhutan Today* (2008). *Bhutan Observer* is published once a week and *Bhutan Times* twice a week. The latest private paper was established in 2008 (*Bhutan Today*) and is published daily. However, news and happenings are updated in all the papers online almost everyday and are easy to access.

These newspapers reach the majority of the literate population in Bhutan via the internet. For the illiterate population, radio and in some cases television are the only ways of accessing

information. Bhutan Broadcasting Services (BBS) is another radio and television service owned by the government but news and happenings are updated daily online through its website. The reliability of these sources depends on the stories it prints and when it comes to opinions, they may reflect the company's viewpoint in contrast to other opinions. However, when it comes to reporting data, statistics and happenings, the figures come from actual government prints and the stories are based on actual happenings. Thus, the reliability of data picked from these papers can be described as fairly accurate.

Discussion Forums Online

The internet is the only place where Bhutanese working in the employment sector both public as well as private, and many students who are studying abroad to achieve higher qualifications meet. These discussion forums have healthy debates on all policies of the government and people can have discussions on any issue without revealing their identity. The constitution of Bhutan grants the right to freedom of expression. However, people have always been wary of criticising government policies until now. This newfound anonymity on the net helps people express their displeasure and criticize government plans and policies, and this has been very helpful in analysing public opinion. The most popular discussion forum has been *Kuensel* online and *Bhutan Times* online.

Films

Bhutanese films depict culture, the changing culture and impact of developmental activities on the people. The film '*Phazhing*' (2005) used in this thesis is particularly relevant because the film was produced by the Ministry of Agriculture in Bhutan to educate people about the importance of farmland and modern tools. This reflects the change in traditional practices of farming to the use of modern tools and impacts on men and women in different ways. Another film that has been cited is the documentary on Bhutan entitled '*The Living Edens*' (1997). This documentary was produced and directed by Harry Marshal and is narrated by the noted actor, Donald Sutherland. The documentary depicts Bhutan as the land of paradise for visiting foreigners and projects the nature and culture of Bhutan as untouched by western influences, and as a land of happiness as aimed to be achieved by the Gross National Happiness concept.

School Course Books

The curriculum of schools has been very important for this thesis. Curricula are set by the Government of Bhutan and represent the Government's views on how youths in Bhutan should be brought up. Some of the courses are related to gender issues and the importance of culture in Bhutan. I have included part of the courses where women are represented in demeaning ways in the course books. This issue has been very relevant because the Government had always advocated women's development and empowerment and the course books contradict the government policies.

Location

Because this thesis is based on development activities, gender relations and culture of Bhutan, it was important that I get first hand information from the Bhutanese people themselves. The data for urban area was collected from the capital city; Thimphu because the capital is the largest place, where people from all over Bhutan come to work together in the public sector and opinions from regional people could be collected. For the rural area, I concentrated on a village in western Bhutan owing to lack of time to cover other villages.

Constraints

There is a big drawback to the census data where people were asked if they were happy and which was used as a measurement for happiness. The question in the government census does not provide any basis for measurement of happiness. It simply asked, 'Are you happy, very happy or not so happy'. This data is broken down into regions but not into gender. While this first time ever-accurate data was recorded, the whole of the country was given a two day holiday so that people were given the opportunity of being present for the data collection at home. People simply stayed at home to attend the census because the government spent a lot of time emphasizing its importance and directing people to be at home through newspapers, TV, radio and announcements through village heads. People also understood the importance of having reliable data to project the country's population. However, the data does not include the opinion of hundreds of Bhutanese who are overseas, are mostly highly literate and have a better understanding of government policies.

Another drawback is that 75% of the people in Bhutan are Buddhists and 25% are Hindus. The national statistics do not reflect the cultural differences between the Buddhists and the Hindus. Both religions have their own religious concept of being happy and women in the Hindu sections have more restrictions in their role in society than Buddhist women. The census report does not show the religious breakdown statistics. The biggest drawback during the writing of this thesis was the lack of research work in the past and lack of data, written and published materials. I tried to make best use of what little material is available. However, many pilot studies have appeared recently collecting data on GNH, but I am not able to make full use of them since the information only became available towards the end of my writing.

Literature Analysis

Rationale

This literature review will provide an insight into gender equality, culture and developmental programmes that can help analyse the policy making of Bhutan. This section will review development theories in relation to gender issues and their position in local culture and tradition and aims to explain the various frameworks adopted in the Bhutanese context of gender development.

Gender Analysis Framework

Gender analysis frameworks are tools to make us understand gender relations and issues in a community. The purpose of such a framework is to bring out existing social relations, roles, positions and the condition of women. Ines Smyth (1999), a gender adviser and trainer in Oxfam's Policy department, writes about patriarchal societies as being a society of culture and rules modelled on male values with unspoken privileges, thus, failing to recognise and reward women's contribution and therefore creating and reproducing the gender hierarchies and inequalities dominant in the wider world (Smyth, 1999:9). The need for gender mainstreaming arises out of such situations, where mainstreaming is understood as:

“both a technical and political process which requires shifts in organizational cultures and way of thinking, as well as in the goals, structures, and resource

allocation of international agencies, government and NGOs” (March⁵ et al 1999:10).

Gender analysis frameworks are needed as practical instruments and tools for policy makers who implement development programmes and projects at different levels to allow them to integrate gender proposals into plans. As Moser explains:

“planners require simplified tools which allow them to feed the particular complexities of specific contexts into the planning process” (Moser, 1993:5).

There is no fixed gender analysis framework in Bhutan. This is evident from the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) Report which states that gender mainstreaming has occurred recently in the Fifth to the Eighth Five-Year Plans (1997-2002) which began:

“WID approach in the Fifth to Eighth Plans to a more integrated approach for gender, a comprehensive strategy for gender mainstreaming is expected to be implemented in the Tenth Plan” (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:11).

Existing gender policies in Bhutan are said to be based on gender frameworks recommended by international donor agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Bank and Asian Development Bank and also on recommendations made by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) organization, all of which Bhutan is a member. Since Boserup (1970) advocated for women’s participation in development projects, particularly in those that would provide women with economic and financial independence so that they could improve their social standing in their communities, the needs of women have been given more importance. This stand was vigorously supported by major bilateral and multilateral donor agencies which added women’s programmes to their portfolios and promoted development policies that included women through strictures known as ‘conditionalities’:

“Aid Conditionality is aid conditional on a number of prerequisites and promises of reforms that has been extended from the economic realm to the political arena” (Santiso, 2001).

⁵ Candida March worked on a wide range of gender and development projects for Oxfam’s Gender Unit and co authored the book ‘*A Guide to Gender Analysis Frameworks*’ with Ines Smyth and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay in 1999.

For effective utilization of development assistance, the Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries recommended and endorsed conditions for eligibility for development assistance. The Special Body is a commission under the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), of which Bhutan is a member, that oversees effective use of development assistance. Some of the conditions endorsed by the Special Body include prioritising projects clearly in terms of development strategies and programmes by negotiating with the donors. These include programmes such as human resource development, good governance, decentralization, involvement of NGOs and integration of aid projects into government budgets (ESCAP:1999). Good governance is one of the four pillars that drive the GNH development concept of Bhutan. On the negative side, ‘conditionalities’ cannot be exercised if Bhutan chooses to reject aid that comes with conditions and women stand to lose out on benefits if some of those conditions are related to women’s welfare. The kind of aid that has been rejected so far has not been made clear but both Priesner (1996:36) and Ueda (2003:106) talk about aid and grants rejected by Bhutan precisely because the conditions did not suit its policies.

Gender mainstreaming developed because of a variety of discussions and initiatives at the international level, which was a direct result of feminist researches. The 1970s and 1980s were the start of the second wave of feminism and the outcome was the emphasis on taking the interests of women into development policies. This gender focus later evolved into gender development policies such as the Women in Development (WID) programme, the Gender and Development (GAD) programme and the Empowerment approach discussed in detail below.

WID approaches responded to the earlier assumptions that development efforts were gender blind and hence male-oriented. Feminist researchers have established that women in the third world are disempowered and left behind in all the developmental processes. This is because many of the traditional practices see women as mindless members of their communities preoccupied with being homemakers confined within a patriarchal male dominated environment (Moser, 1993). Bhutan faces a similar situation where 97% (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007) of the policy makers are men and as a result, women are not only left out of many developmental processes but also lag behind in acquiring basic needs such as education and health facilities. As a part of the international community, Bhutan was left with no choice but to

flow along with international regulations on human rights and to realise its own goal of achieving happiness for the general population of Bhutan including women.

Gender mainstreaming has become an important part of the Bhutanese development approach to include women in all aspects of the development process. However, as discussed above, Bhutan does not have a gender mainstreaming strategy of its own and any mainstreaming is based on the ideas that were imported through international development agencies such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank. In turn, the various development approaches followed by these international organizations were the result of various feminist researchers and authors who worked for organizations devoted to bridge gender gaps. The relevance of these theorists to Bhutan's development approach for women is examined below.

Boserup's development approach

Boserup's work in '*Women's role in economic development*' (1979) talks about what happens to women in the process of social and economic growth throughout the developing world, thereby serving as an international yardstick to measure women's role in development. Boserup, a Danish economist, provides some of the reasons behind women's low participation in economic development processes in developing countries. According to the profile of the United Nation's least developed countries, Bhutan is one of the poorest developing nations in the world.

Women's low level of participation in the public sector is partly attributed to the physically demanding workload attached to public offices (Planning Commission, NCWC, 2007 and RGOB:1). However, this reason can be treated as a lame excuse to sideline women when in reality, hard physical labour is more demanding in agricultural farms and in household work. If women are able to cope with the emotionally demanding and stressful work of caring for the family as well as sharing men's physical work, then office work should not be seen as a hard physical workload but rather as a job that demands a certain level of intellect and education which women are perfectly capable of acquiring. Women in public services or the labour force not only have to do their full time jobs outside their homes, but also are subjected to household work once they step into their houses after their day's work. As Helina Melkas and Richard Anker explain:

“when women integrate into the labour force and become committed labour force participants, they are subjected to the so-called “double day” (market work and housework) (Melkas and Anker, 1998:61).

Melkas and Anker further go on to argue that household burdens cannot be reduced unless strategies such as having fewer children, buying time saving household appliances, working part time are used, and the government helps women with facilities such as nursery schools and housemaids (Melkas and Anker, 1998:61). Thus, women are able to participate in public services only if they have strong domestic support at home, whereas men are free from such household obligations and are able to concentrate fully on one job.

One of Boserup's recommendations to improve women's welfare was involving local Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) is an NGO in Bhutan that works for the welfare of women especially in the rural areas. Some significant programmes initiated by NWAB are the introduction of income generating activities and NWAB has, since its inception in 1981 to 2006, trained some 14,000 women in weaving, knitting and tailoring. Another important step for women was the Rural Credit and Saving Scheme that provided free collateral loans and encouraged women to take up productive enterprises and inculcated saving habits (Bhutan Government Report to CEDAW Committee, 2004:24).

Boserup's work in *Gender and Development* inspired two different development framework approaches in the 1970s and early 1980s. The first approach was the women in development (WID) approach that was directly derived from her work. This approach focussed on efforts to integrate women into development, which was a result of Boserup's conclusion that women were marginalised from development processes. The approach was based on the assumption that women's exclusion from economic growth, employment, increased production and income generation through development of modern technology resulted in unequal existing conditions compared to men. Henceforth, the WID policy focussed on integrating women into these processes through increased female labour participation and making it possible through other means such as training and educational programmes.

The focus for women in Bhutan is on the employment sector. Men's labour participation especially in the urban areas was found to be 72% and women 28%. Of these 28%, nearly three quarters were in the agricultural sector and even in that sector, women did not benefit equally from agricultural extension services, especially training programmes. Such disadvantages were attributed to Bhutan's late introduction of modern education and women's traditional ties to land, inheritance patterns and cultural stereotype perceptions that portray women as less capable than men (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:2). The NCWC has proposed to combat these shortcomings by higher enrolment of girls in tertiary, professional and vocational courses, and raising women's literacy particularly in rural areas. The other step proposed was to develop an incentive system and provide adequate facilities for women agricultural extension workers, provide training to women in leadership skills, business management, technical skills and micro financing (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:2-3). This is an ambitious target aimed at being implemented in the 10th Five-year plan starting 2008. How much of the target will be realised depends on the NCWC's ability to convince the policy makers and the women themselves.

The second approach that Boserup's work inspired was the WAD (Women and Development) approach. This approach questioned the model of development itself by arguing that besides social causes for women's marginalisation such as socialisation and subordinate positions at different levels, the model of development itself needed rethinking. This approach concentrated on transforming the development model itself into an empowerment model and not by eliminating the intrinsic social inequalities that marginalise women in society, household and the labour market. Boserup emphasized women's empowerment through education as the major mechanism by which modernization could work to women's advantage. However, her approach does not address women's childcare and domestic work that are part of social inequalities. Traces of this model can be seen in the Bhutan government's effort to change its gender-neutral policies to gender specific policies. These policies targeted increases in school enrolments, encouraged women with qualifications in top jobs and promoted women only loans. The more recent establishment of various institutions such as NWAB, NCWC, Respect Educate Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW) and REWA (a Bhutanese word for hope) all work to meet specific gender needs. For example, for the many jobs that pay attractive salaries, advertised by

the international organizations in Bhutan and which offer further studies and training outside the country, women are encouraged to apply and preference is often given to women. This could be because the United Nations office in Bhutan wants to set an example to their counterparts in Bhutan. The vision of gender mainstreaming strategy by the United Nations office in Bhutan states:

“UNDP Bhutan country office aspires to be a role model for gender mainstreaming in Bhutan and in the South Asian region, with its entire staff sensitised in gender issues, and their capacities for implementing Gender Mainstreaming in their work enhances” (UNDP and Bhutan, no date :2).

Caroline Moser’s Critical Strategy Framework

Caroline Moser is a social anthropologist, who has carried out extensive work on poverty and gender inequality. Her work in ‘*Gender Planning and Development: Theory Practice and Training*’ (1993) discusses the legitimacy of gender development planning in its own right and is very useful for identifying criteria for assessment for achievement of goals. Moser provided a critical analysis of the gender development approaches applied by the international organizations to the developing countries. For example, the ‘*Women in Development*’ and ‘*Welfare*’ approaches were identified with being too western-centric and with women being just passive beneficiaries (Moser 1993). Moser’s gender mainstreaming analysis has identified lack of effective, consistent and systematic, monitoring and evaluation of gender impacts and outcomes as a cause of the failure of effective gender planning operations and provides alternative measures (discussed later in this chapter) to bridge gender gaps. Her framework is used to analyse Bhutan’s gender policies.

It would be fair to state that Moser’s empowerment approach to development has been formulated based on past researches conducted by other researchers such as Gita Sen and Caren Grown work in ‘*Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives*’ (DAWN) (1985). Moser acknowledges three levels of intervention and empowerment identified by DAWN. First, at the global level, where organizations for common goals are concerned with not only international equitable order, but also other issues such as

disarmament, debt crisis, sex tourism and the multinational sector. Second, women are supported in politically repressive countries e.g. South Africa, including states which attack women's social and economic positions, e.g. the mobilization of strategies at the national level relating to gender needs such as laws and civil codes (Moser, 2003:205).

In other words, the women's empowerment framework seeks to rethink the development objectives of gender programmes. It views women's empowerment and equality as central to development objectives in their own right (Moser, 1993). This framework provides tools for designing programmes and projects that contribute to women's empowerment and gender equality. The tools include a bottom up approach to planning by providing a systematic and analytical understanding of the grassroots empowerment process by which the local community recognises and pursues its strategic needs. Caroline Moser's framework (1993) provides such a framework based on the concept of gender roles and gender needs. Five approaches are identified in Moser's framework. The Welfare approach, the Equity approach, the Anti-poverty approach, the Efficiency approach and the Empowerment approach. All approaches are discussed in detail later in this section.

Women's triple roles are identified as reproductive, productive and community work. Moser includes child rearing, cooking, family health care and maintaining the household through collecting water, fuel and shopping. Such work in poor communities is seen as more labour intensive and time consuming (March, 1999:56). The government of Bhutan acknowledges the existence of such practices but dodges the issue by stating that reproductive tasks are highly valued and a flexible task division between genders exists. Women themselves are blamed for valuing work according to the responsibility of an activity and the time and energy invested in it. Nevertheless, the report proposed steps to address the values of unpaid work through a plan to co-ordinate and implement a time use survey documenting household work that uses unpaid labour. Another step recommended was to incorporate the value of household production in the national accounts system (Bhutan Report to CEDAW Committee, 2004:16).

The second issue included in the triple role is the productive role where women and men are both involved in productive activities, but women's productive work is often undervalued and is less visible (March, 1999:16). An example is the observations I made in a village in Bhutan where

men and women contributed labour equally in cash crop production but the credit is usually given to men. In addition, women are also involved in kitchen garden work where excess vegetables are sold to buy essential household items. The income from the cash crop was much higher than the kitchen garden and could be used for tangible investments such as buying a Rice Mill and Tractors and made an impact on the household. However, the kitchen garden income is consumed by the family in the form of salt, oil and other essential items and the value is forgotten as soon as it is consumed.

The third in the triple role is the community work performed by the women such as taking part in traditional practices of social gatherings, celebrations and the local level of formal politics. Community work here is divided into two parts. One is undertaken by women as an extension of their reproductive role and the other undertaken by men who take part in organized formal politics often framed within national politics. Women's work is related to ensuring provision and maintenance of resources used by everyone such as water, healthcare and education. This is voluntary unpaid work carried out by women in their free time. On the other hand, men's community work in local politics is often paid in cash and they benefit through improved status and power (March, 1999:17). In Bhutan, local politics did not play an important part under the monarchy's rule as the important people in the government were appointed, either by the King or the State. Therefore, an overwhelming number of participants in local levels of politics in some parts of Bhutan were women, as the men were required for more important work at home. This is verified by Schickgruber and Pommaret (1997) when they said that sometimes, as many as 90% of the participants were women (Schickgruber and Pommaret, 1997:94). However, this scenario could change with the recent transition into democracy as the new members of parliament are selected from villages and districts. Beside local politics, women take part in other community responsibilities such as planting and harvesting festivals, funeral rituals and contribution of labour if somebody builds a house in the neighbourhood (Schickgruber and Pommaret, 1997:94).

Welfare approach: Moser focussed this approach on the women in their reproductive role as better mothers. Women are seen as passive beneficiaries of development and top-down handouts in the form of food aid, improving nutrition and family planning were the strategic plans for women in development. The use of this approach is seen in the government's effort to improve

the general health of the population. In their health programme, women are especially identified as being more vulnerable because of extra reproductive health problems faced by women. The eighth five-year plan (1997-2002) involved village women as health workers and identified health services as a priority for intervention. The ninth plan allocated a substantial portion of the health budget to the reproductive health programme which includes family planning and mother and child health issues. The CEDAW Report writes about the steps taken through laws and legislation to protect health particularly that of women. The National Assembly's resolution to immunise all mothers and children in 1988 is seen as an example of such a step (Bhutan Report to CEDAW Committee, 2004:35).

Equity Approach: In this approach, women are seen as active participants in development and the purpose is to gain equity for women. It seeks to reduce inequality with men by recognizing women's triple role and seeking strategic gender needs through state intervention that provides political and economic autonomy. This approach challenges women's subordinate positions. In Bhutan, the development policies as explained earlier have been gender neutral and even the law is gender neutral in itself since the law recognises both men and women as equal before it. According to the Constitution of Bhutan (2008):

“all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status” (Article 7, Fundamental Rights, section 15, Constitution of Bhutan ,2008).

These gender neutral policies have disguised all gender inequalities and now it is up to the NCWC to push forward policies that can in practice reduce the existing inequalities.

Anti-Poverty and Efficiency Approaches: Both these approaches have similar strategies to develop women's welfare. Both see women's poverty as a problem of underdevelopment and not of subordination. These approaches are used to ensure that poor women increase their productivity by seeking to plan gender needs that can enable women to earn income, particularly by establishing small-scale income-generating projects. Women's contribution and participation is seen as the key to efficient and effective development. In Bhutan, poverty is also seen as a cause for malnutrition and this is solved through improving nutrition especially for women through an effective network of health care services, increased awareness in health care and

growing economic prosperity. The other task of increasing income-generating activities for women to combat poverty has been entrusted to the NWAB as discussed earlier.

Improvement in the health sector can be seen from the table below.

Table 1: Percentage of under five children who are underweight, stunted and wasted

Year	1988	1999
Weight for age (under weight)	38	17
Height for age (stunted)	56	40
Weight for height (wasted)	4.1	2.6

Source: Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee (2004:37).

Empowerment Approach: This approach seeks to empower women through greater self-reliance. Male oppression, colonial and neo-colonial oppression are seen as the causes of women's subordination. It recognises the triple role and seeks strategic gender needs indirectly through bottom-up mobilisation of practical gender needs. In Bhutan, women continue to be regarded as homemaker, wife and mother and the tendency to perceive women as biologically less strong and sexually more vulnerable has influenced women's access to education and employment. The biggest male oppression is in the belief that men are higher than women by nine human births. (Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2004:10). I believe that the only solution to refute such beliefs lies in more women being educated and becoming self sufficient as the policies and laws are gender neutral and cannot enforce rules against negative traditional beliefs. Women themselves, especially in rural areas felt it normal to be in a subordinate position as a result of traditional practices because they have been brought up believing in such beliefs. An effort to empower women tends to prioritise or privilege the economic side of empowerment. This is seen in the Bank of Bhutan's '*women only*' loan scheme started exclusively for women who are employed, but women without jobs were offered this loan if they could come up with a guarantor.

According to the Bank of Bhutan, the main objective of introducing a women only loan was to empower women so that they could play an important part in the economic development process (Pem, Bhutan Observer online, 4th July, 2008). This idea of a women only loan scheme seems to have been borrowed from the Grameen Bank's development strategy that is widely used in the

developing countries. Professor Mohammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank reasoned that if loans could be provided to the poor and vulnerable on reasonable and appropriate terms and conditions, these millions of small pursuits could add up to create the biggest development wonder (Grameen Bank, 2009).

Another empowerment approach used in Bhutan is the rural credit scheme provided through a development bank started in Bhutan in 1980 and known as the Bhutan Development Finance Corporation (BDFC). It is the only Bank in Bhutan with a rural focus. With technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank, it was created to provide finance for private enterprise involvement in the country's industrial and agro based sector. The responsibility of BDFC is to provide seasonal, small and medium term loans to the country's small farmers and the rural lending is supported through twenty branches in all the districts of the country. Each loan is disbursed in the name of the household through the village heads and other elected members (Tashi and Dorji, 2002).

This policy of distributing loans in the name of a household itself becomes gender biased as the man in the household sometimes takes the loan on behalf of the household and the loan is misused somewhere else for his personal use. A lady in a village farm I talked to was full of complaint about the loan her husband took from the rural credit scheme. Her husband had brought her a paper to sign to take out a loan as signatures of both husband and wife were necessary to access the loan. However, she was illiterate and could not read the amount written in the form and put her thumbprint on the paper. She came to know about the amount only after she had received a couple of summons to court for defaulting on the loan. When she confronted her husband about it, he explained he used up the money buying household items. Later she found out he had been spending the money on a new mistress and for his other entertainment purposes. This is one of the examples of how facilities can be misused if there are no proper checks by responsible authorities to ensure that services are used for appropriate purposes. Naila Kabeer's suggestion (whose framework will be discussed shortly) of government intervention through gender transformative policies becomes useful here. For example, the loan disbursement officer could make it mandatory for both the husband and wife to be present at the time of loan disbursement and the purposes for which it is to be used explained to them.

Moser's framework can be used for all kinds of planning that can vary from policies to projects. It recognizes the transformative potential of gender planning, challenges unequal gender relations and supports women's empowerment. The framework also recognizes the concept of triple roles of women and emphasizes the value of women's work to planners. Her framework distinguishes gender needs that relate to women's daily lives at the same time maintaining existing gender relations (practical gender needs) and those that could transform existing gender subordination (strategic gender needs). Categorising policy approaches through this framework could prove useful to planners. However, this framework does not mention other forms of inequality through ethnicity. For example, women in southern Bhutan have less freedom in movements outside their homes because of their Hindu background whereas women in central and western Bhutan enjoy more freedom and have less restriction because of their Buddhist background as reported in the Report to CEDAW (2004). Moser's framework does not offer a strategy to deal with similar issues. Within this framework, overcoming obstacles to access resources and finding a place in decision making posts involves systematic confrontation, which can be done through participation. Participation would involve women from communities fighting for a place in decision-making processes enabling them to mobilize plans that can take action against discrimination in access to services and resources. Removal of obstacles also involves conscious involvement that recognizes that subordination is not natural but socially constructed and therefore alterable.

Another feature of Moser's framework is the treatment of gender roles whereby gender inequalities are seen to derive from gender division of labour and allocation of benefits. This gender division of labour in Bhutan is based on traditional practices and the idea of bottom-up gender analysis will involve rethinking gender roles and relations, which necessitates challenging tradition and culture. The empowerment approach on the other hand is not without limitations. The questions of whose perceptions and voices are being taken as women's voices, how far women's participation at the community represents the total population of women and how far women are constrained by cultural norms remain a critical issue for most women in Bhutan. This is particularly difficult in Bhutan because women's representation in the policy making section is only 3% i.e. the parliament (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007) and the total female civil service strength is reported to be 5,763 (29.53%) of the total 19,516 civil servants as

of 30th June 2008 (Royal Civil Service Commission, 2008). This is a small improvement on the December 2007 Report where the total female strength of female civil servants was 29.24%. The effectiveness of planned interventions by the governments to overcome existing gender power relations must be questioned.

Moser's framework is a planning methodology aimed at the root causes of women's subordination that affects their achievement in equality, equity and empowerment. It can be used to examine policy assumptions and can be applied to all levels of planning from community development to regional development and also in project and policy planning. The framework is useful in studying divisions of labour within the household and community level and identifying needs related to male-female subordination. It is also useful for identifying gender differences in access to control over resources and decision-making within households and communities, and finding out the degree to which policies and programmes address strategic gender needs.

Naila Kabeer's Development Approach⁶

Among other theorists, the most relevant theoretical framework and the most applicable to Bhutan at this stage when Bhutan is taking a simple approach to development (learning from the mistakes and examples of other developing countries) is Naila Kabeer's gender development approach. The theoretical frameworks analysed by Boserup and Moser do not discuss the general well-being of the people and culture. Kabeer's framework differs from their approaches in that human well-being is an important element in a gender analysis framework, which is also the main guiding force for GNH.

According to Kabeer and Subramanian (1996), gender blind policies are based on the notion of a male development actor often disguised under gender-neutral language but these are implicitly male biased in that they privilege male needs, interests and priorities in the distribution of opportunities and resources. This gender-neutral position had been maintained in Bhutan in its formulation and implementation of plans, policies and programmes (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:1). Kabeer further goes to argue that gender blind policies are the results of inappropriate assumptions and practices that stem from the norms, beliefs and

⁶ Naila Kabeer, is a social economist specialising in gender, poverty and social policy issues. Kabeer has researched mostly in the South and South East Asian region.

prejudices of policy makers. Kabeer suggests that these erroneous policies have harsher effects on women and the errors are categorized under four heads.

Compartmentalizing: This refers to the practice of treating social reality and women's lives within it by breaking them into a series of compartments where each can be analysed and acted on in isolation. For example, the tendency to consign women's issues to micro level while macro level planning is seen as gender neutral and yet the decisions are taken at macro level. Kabeer cites the example of cutting down public expenditure on education and health to increase expenditure for agricultural products whereas women provide the main labour on farms as well as the well being and health of the family. In Bhutan, governments provide technological help to boost agricultural production but the benefactors are generally men. For example, subsidies provided by the government to buy tractors ease the work of men, as women are considered not strong enough to drive huge machines and would be seen as treading in male areas.

Aggregating: This is used to categorise the general population into the poor, the labour force and the community where inequalities are disguised within the categories. For example, treatment of a household as a typical ideal household, shows a nuclear family with the male breadwinner who makes the decisions, and the woman as the homemaker involved in child caring and housework. In a community, women are assigned the task of collecting wood but for forest degradation, only the women are blamed and not the men who make equal use of the wood and are equally responsible for the degradation.

Eternalizing: This is the tendency to depict gender relations as unchanging and unchangeable. Biological determinism that women are weaker and that trades are suited according to strength result in gender segregated vocational education. Besides, sanctity of culture is invoked whenever any attempts are made to rethink and challenge gender inequalities. A good example is the family planning policy and spread of sexually transmitted diseases STDs. Women are expected to observe the sanctity of marriage because culturally it would work against the woman's reputation if she had multiple sexual partners whereas less is said about men and sometimes their macho reputation is often glorified by the number of sexual partners.

Depoliticizing: This refers to the reluctance of policy makers to intervene in private family spheres, for example, bringing domestic violence to the public as a human rights issue where intervention by the state is necessary. Violence against women costs the state in huge hidden health costs and should also be treated as a health issue as well as a human rights issue. In Bhutan for example, a popular social culture in Bhutan has been the '*night hunting*' practices (a practice of men secretly visiting women at night for sex). Such practices have left women with fatherless children, extra burdens on the household and increases in sexually transmitted diseases. The NCWC has for the first time recommended that such a practice be considered as an offence and to be specifically included under Rape Act (Samal, Bhutantimes, 24th September, 2008). The government has so far depoliticised the issue.

Kabeer further argues in '*Reversed Realities*' (1994) that institutions are inter-related and that a change in one institution will cause changes in the other. Institution is defined as a framework of rules for achieving social and economic goals whereas organizations are the structural forms that the institutions take. Kabeer's social relations framework attempts to rethink existing policy approaches from a gender perspective in order to reveal their biases and limitations and to discard, modify and transform policies in the interest of achieving development with gender equity. Therefore, the goal becomes gender-aware policy and planning (Kabeer, 1994: 299). In Bhutan, the responsibility of looking after women's development was left to the Planning Commission where women's needs became a small part of the overall aims and objectives of the government. With the recent establishment of NCWC, the responsibility was passed on from the Planning Commission to NCWC, which had the sole responsibility of rethinking existing gender policies under the Planning Commission and to transform and modify them in order to achieve gender equality. Kabeer classifies gender-aware policy into three kinds of interventions.

Gender-neutral policies: these policies are based on the accurate assessment of the existing gender division of resources and responsibilities and ensuring that policy objectives are met within a given context. Kabeer suggests that gender-neutral policies seek to target the appropriate development actors in order to realise pre-determined goals but leave the existing division of resources, responsibilities and capabilities intact. Kabeer uses the example of agricultural policy in Kenya where the overall goal of the government policy is to improve productivity but the

agriculture extension services did not take into account that a significant proportion of farmers were female household heads (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996: 10). As acknowledged in Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB (2007), development policies of Bhutan in the past had been gender neutral.

Gender specific policies: Kabeer defines as policies, those which may result from recognizing generated gender-specific practical needs, and constraints, which might stem from the assignment of differing tasks and responsibilities to women and men in pursuit of household survival and security. She cites the example of situations where women observe strict norms of female seclusion but are involved in home income generating projects (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996: 12).

Gender transformative policies: Kabeer describes these as interventions which may target both men and women or, recognising the existence of gender-specific needs and constraints seek to redistribute resources and responsibilities by transforming existing gender relations in a more egalitarian direction. She uses the example of illustrated textbooks in Karnataka where boys were shown engaging in masculine activities. These could be changed into illustrations where men are seen taking part in household work and women aspiring to non-traditional roles (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996: 12). The reverse transformative policies seem to be happening in Bhutan. The Draft Rules and Regulations under the Labour and Employment Act, 2007 slashed the full pay three months' maternity leave to one and half months drawing heavy criticism from working Bhutanese women. The head of the drafting committee, Pema Wangda, a man, later admitted that mostly men attended the consultation and the medical doctors were not consulted on the issue. The criticism has forced the committee to hold the policy for further discussion before it can be put to the government for approval (Pelden, Kuensel online, 11th December 2007).

The above interventions suggested by Kabeer are used by the United Nations Country Office in Bhutan in the form of gender sensitive programmes and project developments. The objectives of such mainstreaming are revealed as ensuring gender sensitivity in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating UNDP programmes and helping Bhutan meet its international obligations to CEDAW, MDGs and the Beijing Platform for Action. Using senior programme managers from the country, the United Nations planned to meet this obligation through gender-

sensitive programmes and project monitoring and evaluation by providing tools and resources such as gender expert human resources (UNDP and Bhutan, No Date: 2-5).

The second objective is to develop mechanisms to promote collective responsibility in gender mainstreaming. This plan is to be carried out by involving gender team members⁷ along with an expert to help them integrate gender related targets and show performance indicators by the working members and even awarding recognition to best performers. The other tool provided to realise the second objective was to strengthen the internal capacities of the staff working in the country office by providing gender sensitization sessions, workshops and training in gender mainstreaming and analysis (UNDP and Bhutan, No Date:5,6).

The third and final objective was to create gender awareness among national partners and gender mainstreaming. This objective is to be achieved through liaising with relevant focal points with ministries and agencies, sensitising media and enlisting a gender checklist for projects. All the objectives are to be referred to the National Plan of Action on Gender (NPAG) 2007-2013 (UNDP and Bhutan. No date: 7). This action plan is expected to be incorporated into other plans proposed by the NCWC. Kabeer provides an impressive insight into how government policies create gender inequalities while at the same time policies do seem to be created for both men and women in general. Kabeer's arguments and suggestions will be used to look into the gender policies in Bhutan to bring out critical argument and the need to bring out changes, in the next chapter on education and employment. Some of the reasons for using Kabeer's work are that her framework sees gender as central to development thinking and not an add-on. It also highlights interactions between various forms of inequality, gender, class and race and finally highlights the political aspects of institutions.

Thesis overview

After the discussion on GNH, methodology and literature analysis, the next chapter, **Chapter 2**, gives a general overview of Bhutan's government, administration, economy and development plans for the country. This overview examines the paternalistic structure of the Bhutanese Government whereby every decision is enforced on the people. Emphasis on why well-being and

⁷ United Nations Offices in Bhutan are normally headed by staff appointed by the UN office in New York and local people with relevant qualifications work as the administrative staff under the UN Regional Head.

culture is an important part of Bhutanese development policies and the government's strong commitment to face western challenges and translate GNH principles into practice is also explained in this chapter.

Chapter 3 focuses on education and employment and concentrates on socio-economic development in terms of women's literacy and women's participation in the education and employment sector. This chapter looks at the history of education for women in Bhutan and notes the progress of women from an entirely illiterate group to the number of school enrolments being almost equal to men's. The slow growth of women in the employment sector, the existing gap between men and women in higher institutions and the low level of women's participation in decision-making bodies in the government are topics covered in this chapter.

Chapter 4 outlines the relationship between gender, culture and development. This chapter also focuses on the traditional practices and religious beliefs of Bhutan and the way these practices and beliefs shape Bhutanese women's lives. Some Acts such as the Marriage Act, the Inheritance Act and the Constitution document will be examined to highlight any gender discriminatory rules that marginalise women. Finally, this thesis concludes in **Chapter 5** with a summary discussion of the main issues covered in each chapter.

2. OVERVIEW OF BHUTANESE DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Bhutan is one of the least known countries in the world. This is because the country was isolated from the rest of the world until the 1960s when it began its economic development plans. This thesis focuses on the gender, culture and development policies of Bhutan. As such, it is very important that the readers of this chapter have a general background knowledge of the history, political system, environment, religion, culture and traditional practices that influence every aspect of Bhutan's development policies.

The Government in Bhutan is responsible for every developmental programme undertaken in the country. The Government decides which aspects of projects are to be initiated, what roles people must play and what rules and regulations are to be enforced. The role of the Government has been very pervasive in implementing past development policies and as such, the role of non-governmental organizations is not discussed much except for some areas where relevant. A concept that is applicable to the way the Bhutan Government works is Foucault's concept of 'governmentality'. Governmentality is defined as:

"the way governments try to produce the citizen best suited to fulfil those governments' policies, the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed" (Lemke, 2004).

The economy of the country since the 1960s has been guided through development plans which the then Development Secretariat and now the Planning Commission directed, subject to approval from the National Assembly. Bhutan is dependent on foreign aid to implement its policies but follows its own set of principles. For example, Bhutan depends heavily on India for almost all its development programmes. The entire fund for first and second five-year plans (1961-1971), and 80% of the following plans were financed by India. Other international donors are the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, United Nations and on a smaller scale countries such as Denmark, Japan and Switzerland. Bhutan received a grant of US\$12 million in 2007 to fight poverty (World Bank, 2007), and US\$ 15 million from the ADB in 2007 (ADB, 2007) to help establish small and medium cottage industries. The government used traditional social institutions and involved local people in implementing development programmes in their own districts and villages. However, the government at the centre initiates all development plans

and the local levels of governance more or less agree with the centre. Hence, the governance system in Bhutan is not bottom up but a top down system of governance. The role of government can be seen in developing major plans such as introduction of the mega hydro projects, control of the media by deciding when to introduce the internet and television to the country, and mandatory rules to follow culture and traditional practices. In fact, the Government plays the role of a parent to a child in deciding what is good and what is bad. As Priesner puts it:

“With interaction between the state and society at a low level, the system was rather characterised by feudal paternalism than state paternalism” (Priesner, 1996:39).

Therefore, any change in Bhutan Government policies immensely affects the lives of the Bhutanese people. For this purpose, Foucault’s discourse on governmentality (Dean, 1999) will be useful to help explain the role of the Bhutanese Government. As Dean (1999) argued, the historical background of a nation from the perspective of governmentality would provide a good analysis on regimes of government and the pattern of governance by asking ‘how’ questions. My analysis of the historical background of Bhutan is an attempt to show how the political and administrative structure of the governance system works in Bhutan. The ‘how’ question is answered by the system of governance where policies are presented as promoting the will of the people which will become evident as this chapter progresses.

The historical and political background is also addressed to show that Bhutan’s development policies are rooted in its historical cultural values. Bhutan has placed cultural values as a means of human well-being and empowerment and it has recognised that economic and social reforms have to be addressed from a cultural perspective to achieve a sustainable development. Development policies in Bhutan are inter-related with culture in many ways. Perhaps the simplest interaction between the two is the Government’s rule enforced on the people to wear national dress on all formal occasions and when visiting all public offices. Development stages can change but the method in which development is carried out is done in line with the Government’s effort to preserve its cultural identity. A striking example of the changes of modernization is visible in the national sport of Bhutan, archery tournaments. For example, more and more Bhutanese men have started using imported compound bows for archery tournaments. The traditional methods of practising archery were by using bamboo bows and arrows. However, the cheerleaders or the dancers have always been women and there is no change in their dancing

styles. Women do occasionally dance to the tune of modern Bhutanese dance music but they are expected to stick to traditional choices of songs and dances.

The Government is bridging potential conflict between culture and development and blending culture and development which is a difficult task. One strategy is its unwillingness to welcome outside influence, as Priesner puts it:

“Bhutanese are firmly in the driver’s seat of development, while foreign experts are strictly considered advisors with no influence on decision-making. Similarly, it is not uncommon that a development aid is rejected because of attached strings set by donor agencies” (Priesner, 1996:36).

The rejection of aid that comes with conditions attached could mean the Bhutan Government has the upper hand in choosing any projects that it wants to develop but at the same time there is the possibility that aid that had too much emphasis on issues related to women could have been rejected. This is clear evidence that Bhutan is trying to maintain its difference from other developing countries in the sense that it is trying to remain free from western influences, but at the same time welcome the parts of modernization that suit Bhutan’s need to blend in with the changing world. This exposes the paternalistic structure of the Bhutan Government as explained by Priesner:

“the society as its base, used to an economy of scarcity and to a paternalistic political system without grassroots participations, had very few demands beyond their subsistence needs” (Priesner, 1996:39).

On the other hand, economic development has an impact on changing the lives of the people, especially women. However, if the paternalistic system of the Government chooses to ignore the needs of the general population, then the government would surely be paternalistic towards its women and ignore their needs. This in turn is unfavourable to traditional cultural practices. The impacts on the lives of women as a result of globalisation and changes in traditional practices are well explained by various feminist writers such as Christa Wichterich (1996), Stacy and Price (1981), and Judith Squires (2007) amongst others in chapter 4 under gender, culture and development.

The structure and administration system of the Bhutanese Government is explained to understand women’s role in decision-making positions. The economy of the country is introduced to gain an insight into the gender division of labour in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The five-year

development plans and their achievements are discussed to examine initiatives taken by the government to improve women's welfare, reduce inequality in all sectors and more importantly, to assess women's role in Bhutan's development policies in the paradigm of the GNH concept. The development plans also help us to understand the situation of women across Bhutan and the progress they have made since the inception of several NGOs and some of the actions taken by the Government.

Government

Medieval Bhutan until the 19th century had a dual system of governance⁸. The state clergy was headed by the Je Khempo (abbot) and a theocracy was administered by monks and headed by temporal rulers known as the Desi (Aris, 1982). Ueda describes the medieval economy as being very successful in maintaining a subsistence level within a context of poor internal communication and isolation from the outside world and (Ueda, 2003:47). The shape of the government changed with the introduction of the monarchy in 1907 and tilted towards modern development with the start of development programmes from the early 1960s. This change was undoubtedly invoked by security concerns and the urgency to keep pace with the outside world in order to maintain its independence (Preisner, 1996).

Basu (1996)⁹ attributes the roots of the changes in the governance system of Bhutan to the introduction of the monarchy in 1907, which prompted Bhutan to seek a capitalist development, and was thus forced to invest in social welfare measures such as education and construction of roads for trade purposes. Bhutan had been an absolute constitutional monarchy during the period

⁸ Not much is known about government in Bhutan before the arrival of Shabdrung because of lack of written records but in the 17th century, Bhutan was ruled by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, a spiritual lama who arrived in Bhutan when he came as a political refugee in 1616. Bhutan had been divided into small territories under numerous feudal lords warring with each other trying to gain control of territories. By the time of Shabdrung's death in about 1651, the whole country had come under his personal control with the exception of a few eastern regions that were under the process of being conquered. The actual time of Shabdrung's death is unknown because he decided to enter into an indefinite spiritual retreat in 1651 at the age of 58 and his death was kept a secret until half a century later lest turmoil should arise in the ⁸newly created country until a strong successor be found. He had entrusted the whole business of the government to the first regent of Bhutan, Tenzin Drugye and the country thereafter had 55 regents until the start of monarchy in 1907 (Aris, 1994:37). In the eighteenth century, Bhutan fought a war with the British East India Company, leading to a peace treaty in 1774. However, the border conflict with the British continued, which eventually led to a major war in 1864-65, known as the Duar war. Bhutan lost the war and the whole area of fertile strip known as the Bengal Duars was annexed to British India in exchange for an annual rent of 50,000 Rupees to be paid to Bhutan (Bhutannica, 2009)

⁹ Basu is a Professor of International Relations at the Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

of the first and second kings (1907-1952). It was only during the time of the third king that he passed some of his powers to the National Assembly by giving them the right to veto him by a two thirds majority, and the fourth king went further to change absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The most recent change has been the first democratic election held in March 2008 and an elected Prime Minister heads the Government..

Curtis (2002) deals mostly with the historical analysis of government powers where the role of government is compared to that of a father in the household who takes decisions for the family. Similarly, Bhutan has a paternalistic type of governance whereby it is implied that the government is in a better position to decide what is good for the general population. Dean (1999) adds to this aspect of ‘governmentality’ by suggesting that government should be analysed through the mechanisms they use to mobilise and work through the needs and lifestyles of the people (Dean, 1999:12). The emphasis is on the way government uses institutions to steer its activities. The Government projects its policies to the people as being implemented in the best interests of the people, but at the same time invisibly controls the ends it achieves. An example of such control is indicated when Bhutan describes cultural preservation as:

“human development that concerns itself principally with allowing people the choices to lead the lives they want. Because cultural lifestyles are at the core of these choices, human development is as much about cultural choices as political and economic ones” (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005:16).

Yet at the same time the government seems to be informing the people that opening up to other cultures would not be in the best interest of the nation as it refers to the UNDP’s concept of ‘rootless growth’ referring to an:

“undesirable form of growth that causes people’s cultural identity to wither and that homogenises a diverse and rich culture” (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005:17).

The art of governmentality according to Curtis “invoked not imposition of rules but rather the ‘right disposition of things’” as the government seeks to achieve its ends through the objects of the government themselves. The meaning of right disposition of things is clear as Curtis quotes Foucault:

“he who governs, must only govern to the extent that he thinks and acts as if he were in the service of those who are governed” (Curtis, 2002: 505-533).

The Bhutan Government tries to achieve its ends through bringing in modernization that can fall in line with its policies by reconstructing people's needs, but at the same time holding on to the old values. A typical example of such a move is the electrification of rural areas, which serves as an incentive to produce more so that people can buy more things, but at the same time maintains the old value of subsistence living on the land. Electrification of rural areas enabled people to use modern kitchen appliances and motivated people to work more so that they earn more to be able to procure these appliances. Therefore, people are able to sustain themselves and at the same time cope with the demands of modernization. Electrification and road construction have made it possible for people to have more time to concentrate on higher production, whereas previously, people would have spent more time in collecting firewood and transporting products on horseback and carrying them to the markets themselves.

Another example of achieving the Government's ends through its policies is the increase in the numbers of health centres in all districts. The health centres not only attend to minor medical needs of the people but are also largely involved with providing reproductive health care for women who live far away from the city. As a result, maternal mortality per 100,000 live births appears to have been reduced from 773 in 1984 to 255 in 2000 (UNICEF, Bhutan, 2006:35). The problem with maternal health is that 80% of deliveries take place at home with or without trained birth attendants and the purpose of the government is to institutionalise 100% deliveries (Black and Stalker, 2006:36-37). This distribution of welfare services in remote areas allows people to stay in isolated subsistence farms. Women especially, do not have to venture far out of their homes to seek reproductive health facilities.

Modern Government

"With minor changes and a few additions, the structure of modern government is the same as that created by the Shabdrung" (Aris, 1994).

Local governors govern the districts and any major decision-taking policies are routed through the central government. In the later half of the nineteenth century, the central government began weakening progressively, which resulted in the emergence of a powerful Governor of the west, Jigme Namgyel, who with the help of his network of alliances and political genius became the strong man of Bhutan. His son, Ugyen Wangchuck, won a decisive victory with the final battle

of Changlimithang in Thimphu over all his fiercest opponents and, in 1907, an assembly of members from the monastic body, the civil servants and the people unanimously elected him the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan. From absolute monarchy in 1907, the country moved towards a constitutional monarchy with the establishment of the National Assembly in 1953. After 1969, the King himself initiated a National Assembly cabinet that could remove the king with a no confidence vote, and he retracted his veto power. The country enjoyed a period of peace and tranquillity under the rule of the first two kings from 1907 to 1952 (Aris, 1994). It is to be noted that no woman ever occupied a position of importance until the reign of the fourth king when his sisters took up ministerial positions (Sinha, 1991:212).

However, it is the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (1952-72) who is known as the father of modern Bhutan. He understood that the world was changing and that for the country to survive it could no longer maintain its isolation and must start developing. In 1961, the first five-year development plan was launched with the help of India, with particular emphasis on road building. In 1962, Bhutan joined the first international organization, the Colombo Plan, and in 1971 became a member of the United Nations. Bhutan became a member of the World Bank in 1981. The fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, dedicated himself to a policy of socio-economic development for the country while at the same time maintaining traditional culture and ancestral heritage. At his coronation in 1974, the King declared that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product and the King emphasized the well-being of the people of Bhutan and their ability to profit from the process of modernization without losing their sense of cultural identity.

It is evident from the king's declaration that the GNH concept combines two distinct identities, that of economic development and sustaining culture and traditional practices. This concept became a popular theme as the basis of all developmental plans and came to be known as Gross National Happiness (GNH). The king's concept of happiness included improving the general well-being of the people and the economic policy of happiness included using GDP as a measurement of economic growth and general well-being of the people, which is discussed in chapter 1. The King has put plans into place to accept the process of modernization while also embracing Bhutan's tradition and culture.

Administration

The King is the head of state but no longer the head of Government. A cabinet made up of Ministers and Secretaries of State and the Prime Minister governs the country. A major political reform initiated by the King in 1998 had Ministers elected by the National Assembly for a period of five years. This has been replaced by the recent parliamentary election in March 2008 and the country has now entered into an era of democratic rule. The first draft of the Constitution of Bhutan was initiated under the command of the King in 2006 and was adopted on 16th July 2008 (Kuenselonline, July, 2008). This change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy conforms to Foucault's argument that transformations in governments are a result of problems faced by the population and these very problems provided the government with a more general object and reduced the family to a segment of general object. The relationship between the people and government and the causes of transformation in the Government is described in Gautam Kumar Basu's '*Bhutan, The Political Economy of Development*' (1996).

Basu credits the third monarchy for bringing in real socio-economic development whereas the first two kings were seen to concentrate on '*efforts to assert an effective central authority over a disparate collection of monastic and regional elites*' (Basu, 1996:20-21). According to Basu, the third king's intention for reforms was to end slavery and cater to the needs of these former slaves to acquire their own land for cultivation. Basu implied that landlessness was seen as a problem and the King tried to solve the crisis by introducing land reforms that limited the size of land ownership to 25-30 acres depending on areas and distributing land to the landless that was under government control. Another factor that was considered for such reforms was the internal pressure the Government might have faced because of the uneven fertility of the land in the southern, western and northern valleys of the country. This situation would have resulted in the possibility of the otherwise self-sufficient northern community¹⁰ becoming economically dependent on the southern region and 'generate more pressure, in the absence of any other means of livelihood, on the agrarian sector' (Basu, 1996:28-29).

After the agrarian reforms, the next problem faced by the Bhutanese during the initial stages of development policies was isolation. It was the belief that development would not trickle down to

¹⁰ Northern Bhutan traded with Tibet for essential needs and the Chinese policy of Tibet put a stop to all trades as the border was completely sealed off during the time of Chinese aggression in the 1950s.

those who lived in isolated and inaccessible areas unless linked with a communication network that would integrate different regions of the country (Basu, 1996: 31). In line with Foucault's argument, people's poverty and isolation at a time modernization has been taking place around the world presented the Government of Bhutan with a problem and the Government offered a solution to these problems through its various development policies carried on through the five-year plans. It was also because of the looming threat from China in the event of an Indo-China war that Bhutan had to develop its socio-economic conditions so as to be able to have a voice of its own. A quotation from Basu supports this notion:

"despite repeated Chinese declarations regarding its friendly attitude towards Bhutan, the latter could not be a mere spectator in any conflict between two of its neighbouring countries" (Basu, 1996:32).

Before the start of developmental programmes, relations between the Government and the people were minimal. People paid tax and contributed free labour to the Government for the purposes of constructing forts, working as transporters as required by law and contributing soldiers whenever they were ordered in times of conflict. Stefan Priesner described the Bhutanese before the development programmes as people living on subsistence farming and forest products, surplus production was bartered because of absence of money and the transport system was solely dependent on mule tracks. There were only a handful of dispensaries in the whole country, a leper colony and two doctors. Epidemics sometimes wiped out a whole colony and the life expectancy of the people was estimated to be 38 in 1960. Therefore, education became an unnecessary luxury for survival and only 440 students were enrolled in 11 schools across the country in 1950 (Priesner, 1996:25).

The National Assembly and the local administration debate the national issues and discuss public laws, which affect both men and women of the country. The people in the National Assembly are responsible for taking important decisions related to distribution of budgets, guiding planners to develop frameworks, enact and amend laws. The National Assembly functions at the central level and the sessions are open to the public and the local administration takes care of development work at the local level in the Districts. Groups of people's representatives and high-ranking civil servants of the district meet to discuss developmental projects and at village level the blocks are headed by a village headman elected by villagers, and he takes decisions in development areas. Both the district level committees and the block level committees have been

given more decision-making powers along with certain financial responsibilities (UNDP, No Date:3).

Decentralization began with the 7th five-year plan (1992-97) with the introduction of Zonal administration. Before this, the central government interacted directly with the district governments. This process was introduced with the aim of bringing administration closer to the people. As will be seen in later chapters, where statistics for the participation of women in decision-making roles will be provided, almost all the members at the higher level of governance are men and all the decisions are made by men. Women cannot object for sheer lack of representation and women have no choice but to go along with whatever decisions are made by men in the Government. These have resulted in the institutions themselves being gendered. Hence, women's voices for policies are confined within their own households where they concentrate on family welfare and their needs as dependants of men rather than being integrated into development programmes in productive sectors.

An overwhelming majority (97%) of the decision makers are men (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007) and men's views and visions of the development process indicate a masculine approach to development programmes. Owing to lack of women's participation, women lose control over productive resources and the low level of women's literacy results in men mediating women's relations to the professional world and development processes. However, from the March 2008 parliamentary election, Bhutan now has a total of 6 women on the National Council and 4 women as members of parliament.

Economy

The general economy of Bhutan is agriculture and it provides 77% of the livelihood for the people. Agriculture is subsistence farming and the people rely on animal husbandry to supplement their living. Owing to its small population, the living conditions of the people are not as dire as those of some of the third world countries but Bhutan is one of the least developed countries in the world. The Bhutan Government relies mostly on its hydro projects and tourism for revenues. The industrial sector is technologically backward and most of the production is the cottage industry type. The GDP growth rate of Bhutan increased from 7.1% in 2003 to 10% in

2006 (Asian Development Bank, 2006). The Bhutanese currency is called the Ngultrum and is pegged to the Indian Rupee. US\$1 equals roughly 40 Ngultrum.

Agricultural Sector

The economy of Bhutan is characterized by predominant engagement in self-employment, which involves working on one's own land often supplemented by small income generating activities at home. From the time of Shabdrung's reign till the Land Act of 1970, no distinction had been made between men and women with respect to land ownership, although the land had to be registered in the name of the head of the household (Pain and Pema, 2004:424).

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in Bhutan. Until a decade ago, agriculture was usually subsistence farming and rural farmers had hardly anything to export. The farmers produced rice, wheat, potatoes, barley, buckwheat and vegetables for subsistence living and the farm products were supplemented by keeping various domestic animals for milk and meat. Other income generating activities were weaving and other handicraft works that were sold to retailers in the city to be sold to tourists. In 2004, agriculture accounted for 24.7 % of the total Gross Domestic Product and provided 70% of the livelihoods for the population (RGOB and NSB, 2007:102). Agricultural practices have changed over the past few years and mass production of cash crops has picked up pace owing partly to improved communication facilities. There is an increased tendency to go for cash crops such as apples in the north and nuts, oranges and cardamom in the south. Women are usually involved in weeding and men climb the trees to prune them and spray insecticides. However, during fruit plucking seasons, men and women contribute equal labour. Other crops that are exported are ginger, chillies and vegetables, which are usually exported to the neighbouring countries of India and Bangladesh.¹¹

With the objectives of people's quality of life and improving their earning capacity, the Government has been actively involved in providing new technology to the agricultural sector with training centres set up in all districts. People are educated on the use of new machinery, the

¹¹ In June this year, three food companies of India have expressed an interest in buying 5000 tons of potatoes and have a longer term business interest in Bhutan to make chips. Bhutanese potatoes are said to be of high quality where only 10% are rejected at the processing plant whereas 30 to 40% of Indian potatoes are rejected. Previous purchases were rated Nu. 15 per kilogram (Bhutan Times, 2008).

improved quality of seeds and achieving food sustainability through these centres. People in Bumthang, central Bhutan lived on buckwheat and potatoes. Bumthang is a cold place with an altitude of 2850 metres; however, the government has been very successful in promoting rice production at the 2600 metre level where the lower part of Bumthang lies. The promotion of rice cultivation has a great impact on the diet of the people and people no longer have to depend on other districts for rice. Rice production at a higher elevation was a part of the Ministry's triple gem concept, improvement of production, access and marketing. This promotion was expected to reduce farmers' reliance on imported rice and boost their income through the sale of unique products capable of receiving premium prices (Chophel, 2005).

Some warmer places such as the Wangdue Phodrang district are capable of producing rice twice in a year. This double production has led to marketing of excess rice in other parts of the country and has greatly supplemented their income. According to locals I talked to, Rinchegang, a village in the Wangdue district in Bhutan has prospered over the years as a result. The Government's initiative through the Ministry of Agriculture has greatly improved the living conditions of farmers. During my fieldwork, I observed that because of electrification, farmers are able to use electronic appliances such as rice cookers and water boilers and because their incomes have improved, they are able to afford them. The recent electrification of villages by the Government has cut down much normal village work such as collection of firewood and decreased household work. People now have more time to concentrate on alternative cropping, handicraft work and travel around to sell their products. Construction of farm roads has greatly reduced travelling distances and increased load carrying capacity. Farmers are seen to hire trucks in groups to sell their products on the Indian borders. The age old practice of using horses is rarely seen except for places of high altitude where road construction is still being planned.

The positive impact on the general well-being of this rural area is reflected in the increased luxury items in the households such as televisions, radios and cars. Because the majority of land is owned by women, the gender impact of agricultural export production has been proportionate. Incomes are generally managed by the women in rural areas where most of the people are illiterate. But the rate of literacy is higher in men and in a household where women are uneducated, the educated male is given a free hand to invest money on behalf of the household. The literacy gap in the villages can be attributed to the matrilineal system of practices where girls

are favoured to inherit properties and as a result, more girls are kept at home to take care of properties and elderly parents. Based on my observation in the village, some other factors that affect the literacy gap are long distance travel to school, poverty and vulnerability of girls to sexual harassment, and the belief that men gain employment more than women (See Chapter 3).

Industrial Sector

The industrial sector is relatively underdeveloped and it has played a small part in recent years. The country's mining activities are limited to relatively small operations involving dolomite, gypsum, limestone, slate, coal, marble, quartzite and talc. Other major industrial schemes include the Chukha Hydro Project commissioned in 1986, to the Puna Tsangchu Project commissioned in 2008¹². These energy industries contribute the most to the Gross Domestic Product. Most of the labourers working at Hydro Projects and construction sites are Indian workers. This is because Bhutan lacks skilled workers and because the development programmes started late, most of its human resources are under training resulting in a mismatch between the needs of the private sector and the qualifications of the school graduates. Expatriates in Bhutan usually work as short-term consultants, volunteers for international organizations and co-workers to see to that international grants are being properly utilised. The expatriates live within their own community and are rarely seen mixing with local people except for occasional official gatherings and shopping in the vegetable market.

GNH emphasizes social welfare development through health care, education and other social services, but no welfare can be sustained without economic growth. For economic growth, Bhutan has poured billions of Ngultrums into developing hydro projects tapping its rich water resources. These projects have been sold to the public as a gold mine for Bhutan, which is even better than oil fields where resources run out. However, no discussion of hydro projects that have been established so far has even touched upon the negative impacts they have on the environment such as widespread forest loss, floods, destroying aquatic habitats, displacing the

¹² The commissioning of the Chukha Hydro Project in 1986 generated 3357.2 million Units, the Kuricho Power project generated 365.6 million units and the Basochu Project generated 331.7 million units respectively in 2006. The biggest project, which is the Puna Tsangchu project, was recently commissioned in May, which is capable of generating 1095 Megawatt (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2007). The sale of energy from Chukha Hydro-electric power in 2006 was 3,596.09 Million Nu. (Ngultrum) out of which 133.2 million Nu. accounted for domestic consumption (NSB, 2007:142).

indigenous population and reduced water flow that robs the lower lands of fertile deposits. In this case, Bhutan does benefit from its mountainous terrains and the rivers flow into the plains of India.

An observation from a forum discussion in the Bhutan Times media reveals that some people think that government processes could be improved as is evident from the online discussion below:

“The very fact that most of our development projects are carried out without adequate social impact assessments leaves a lot people suffering. The introduction of a detailed SIA (Social Impact Assessment) and public consultation (instead of the normal discussion with gups (Village heads)) would further legitimize the development projects. There is no question that such projects would be better for the country as a whole, but shouldn't the few households affected be adequately compensated? Considering the project is going to generate billions of Ngultrums in profits, it is only fair that affected people be handsomely rewarded just for agreeing to vacate their ancestral land/homes to begin life elsewhere. If we look at the EA Act 2000 (Environment Act), public consultation is a legal requirement but we do not even have access to the EIA (Environment Impact Assessment) documents, forget about providing feedbacks and viewpoints. We all agree that the people involved in planning the projects have worked really hard and we appreciate it and SIAs and EIAs would add more value to the whole project.” (Discussion Forum, Bhutan Times, 28th June, 2008).

Tourism

Tourism has been used as a successful strategy combining development, growth and cultural preservation. The image for tourism in Bhutan is projected as the place with a rich cultural heritage and undisturbed ecological resources. The untouched snow-peaked mountains, unpolluted air, crystal clear rivers and lakes, rare species of plants and animals, uninhabited high mountains and the country's unique development concept of Gross National Happiness is sold to outsiders as a place worth visiting and worth the price paid. Harry Marshall, Producer and Director of the documentary film *'The Living Edens: Bhutan'* describes Bhutan as follows:

“If there is any country on Earth that qualifies as an Eden -- not just in part, but in its entirety -- I believe it is Bhutan”.

Marshall commends Bhutan for having the highest range of forest cover, an extraordinary range of conditions such as varying altitudes, a combination of natural riches with the deeply

embedded Buddhist culture in the hearts of ordinary people. This is the very model Bhutan is built on when it projects itself to the outside world.

The Government of Bhutan opened tourism with a cautious approach in 1974. Two hundred and eighty seven tourists visited the kingdom in 1974 for the fourth king's coronation. The third Five-Year plan put aside a modest 1.7 million Ngultrum to develop tourism and build small tourist cottages and a rest house (Planning Commission, 1961:28). Even though the potential of foreign exchange earnings is very high, the Government has regulated the flow of tourists through a high tariff imposed on visitors. This imposition of high tourist rates has succeeded in making tourism in Bhutan a distinctive and exclusive experience. The challenge for the Government is to maintain a balance between earnings, preserving cultural values and preventing cultural pollution. An example of the government's effort to preserve cultural and traditional practices can be seen in its control over tourism regulations. The government designed a policy of 'high yield low impact' tourism aimed at wealthy tourists who are interested in and sensitive to the traditional and cultural practices of Bhutan, the objective being to generate economic self-sufficiency and to prevent cultural pollution. All aspects of tourism remained strictly operated and monitored by the government agency Bhutan Tourism Corporation Limited (Dorji, Sustainability of Tourism, 2008: 84):

"Tourism has tremendous potential for generating revenue for a country but it also acts as a medium to spread western cultural homogeneity" (Reinfield, 2003:1).

In 1990, tourism was partially privatised and individual agencies started operating the sector. Today the industry continues to run under private agencies accountable to ABTO (Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators) under the Ministry of Economic Affairs. ABTO was formed in 1999 with the objective of bringing together all private sector interests under the tourism industry. The Government approves hotels and other accommodation to ensure standards of hospitality and English speaking tour guides are examined and licensed by the Tourism Authority (Tourism Authority of Bhutan, 1999:2). Tourism policy requires that guests adhere to the itinerary fixed by the tour company. They are greeted at the airport on arrival and accompanied until they arrive at the airport on their departure and this can be taken as an indication of the Government's desire to prevent western cultural influences on the local people. The number of tourists entering the country is regulated through pricing and issuing visas only on arrival (Topgay, 2000:2).

Europe tops the list of visitors to Bhutan followed by America and the Asian Pacific region. In 2002, 2015 Europeans visited Bhutan and in 2006, the number increased to 7,031 visitors¹³. The total amount of revenue generated from tourism increased from 7.98 US million dollars to 23.92 million US dollars in 2006 (RGOB and NSB, 2007). The tourism industry boasted of 238 registered tour operators, 470 male guides and 53 female guides, 717 male housekeepers and 773 female housekeepers in 2005 (RGOB and NSB, 2007:81)¹⁴. A gender gap is visible here with more men being employed in better positions with better benefits than women who are employed at the lowest level of the tourism occupations. Recently, Bhutan has become a haven for a list of Hollywood visitors and the reasons for choosing to visit Bhutan can be attributed to local people's lack of interest in celebrities and the absence of paparazzi following their every move. Any visitor entering the kingdom with the intention of journalism may have their visas refused on application. Visitors have to declare their places of interest, arrival dates, place of origin and the purpose of their visit (RGOB and NSB, 2007:162).

The main attractions for tourists are much of Bhutan's undisturbed flora and fauna, natural beauty and cultural heritage. Visitors are normally about 45 years or older. This trend could probably be attributed to the high tariff structure. Most visitors are those who are interested in the Himalayas, Buddhism and Buddhist culture. Cultural tours comprised 75 % of the total tourism business and recently there has been increased interest in trekking (Tenzin, 2008:20). I myself own a Guide licence and have been carrying out part time guiding for a number of years and have shared accommodation in same hotels with the guests while visiting different parts of the country. The hotels are built using typical Bhutanese architecture and the rooms are made up in Bhutanese style filled with Bhutanese furniture. The visitors get to experience a taste of Bhutanese living. However, the most expensive resorts such as the Aman Kora where high profile visitors lodge have buildings with Bhutanese architecture on the outside and western styles of comfort inside the rooms. These resorts are located far away from the city inside the woods facing spectacular views of the snow peaked mountains and safe from intruders and inquisitive onlookers. It is mandatory for any building to be in line with the directives provided

¹³ Americans increased from 2142 in 2002 to 5560 in 2006 and Asia Pacific visitors increased from 1332 in 2002 to 4264 in 2006. There were 32 visitors from New Zealand in 2002 and 116 in 2006. Visitors from the Middle East seem to have decreased from 98 in 2002 to 46 in 2006 (NSB, 2007).

¹⁴ Tourism in 1995 accounted for 850 employees including tour operators and tourism classified hotels. There is also extra employment for seasonal and temporary staff which varies yearly (Tenzin, 2008:20).

by the Government, i.e. all structures must have Bhutanese architecture to preserve the cultural heritage.

Tourism has provided employment to local Bhutanese people. A number of people have found employment in the form of guides, cooks, transport operators and hotel and restaurant owners. Tourism also contributed significantly to rural earnings through tourist transport and portage. Tourist trekkers need porters to carry their luggage and rations at high altitudes so villagers with spare time in their hands, especially in winter when the cropping season is low, act as porters to supplement their agricultural income. Horses and Yaks are an excellent source of portage. Another effect has been the promotion of indigenous cottage industry and mushrooming handicraft shops in Thimphu and other frequently visited areas.

The interactions between the tourists and the locals are those of business relationships. Tourists are guided by their guides and stick to their pre planned schedules. The visits to popular sites of historical importance and others are an opportunity for the locals to showcase their local products for sale and these locals can be seen displaying their goods where tourists pass by. For the local retail shops, the tourist season is always a peak season for sales. The tourists are in Bhutan for short periods and hence their influence on the local youths and culture is minimal. Greater influences however come from the media such as television and the internet and people have started to accept global culture and values undermining indigenous culture and practices. Excessive advertisements (Indian TV channels) have led to change in life styles with changes in dress styles and new consumption demands (Raptan, 2007).

Developmental Programmes

To record the process of economic development over a period of time, discussion of the past five-year plans will be helpful in providing an idea of how far Bhutan has progressed from the end of the isolation period to present economic conditions. However, only those topics related to the discussion of this thesis will be touched upon in more detail.

The third king of Bhutan started modern development process in 1961 with a careful developmental programme that allowed gradual changes. Bhutan has seen first hand cultural and environmental degradation, which resulted from fast paced and unchecked development. All

five-year plans emphasize environmental and cultural conservation. This conservation process along with economic growth and infrastructure build up can be attributed to two factors. The first is the influence of Buddhism in the daily life of Bhutanese people and the prevailing age-old culture. Mahayana Buddhism that exists in Bhutan characteristically prohibits hunting, fishing and taking away any form of life. The second factor can be attributed to the leadership of the monarchs whose visions embraced long-term socio-economic development and ecological gains instead of short-term benefits. The country's isolation had been the main reason for late developmental activities and had enabled Bhutan to learn from the mistakes made by other developing countries (Basu, 1996; Priesner, 1996; and Ueda, 2003).

Five Year Plans

First Five-Year Plan (1961-65)

The first five-year plan concentrated mainly on building infrastructure. It was the end of self-imposed isolation after the borders with Tibet were sealed in 1959 following the Chinese invasion. The main objective of the first five-year plan was to end Bhutan's isolation from the rest of the world. This is clear from the Planning Commission's objective explained below:

“The highest priority in the first plan was inevitably in ending Bhutan's state of isolation and building transportation links” (Planning Commission, fifth five-year plan).

The only link to the outside world before development programmes were implemented was trading with Tibet travelling on foot and horseback. With the start of the first five-year plan, the first ever motor road was constructed from Phuentsholing in the south bordering the Indian state of Assam to the capital city, Thimphu. The plan was formulated by the Planning Commission of Bhutan in consultation with India as the entire expenditure was financed by the government of India. The creation of basic infrastructure such as roads, power, communication systems, transport and a suitable administrative system was successful with a grant of 172 million rupees and the second five-year plan consumed 200 million rupees (Planning Commission, fifth five-year plan).

The construction of roads helped women in transporting loads such as Government tax paid in kind in the form of rice, butter and wheat. Like men, women had to carry everything on their

backs. According to one of my participants, these journeys sometimes resulted in several women being sexually harassed and abused on the night halts on the way.

Second Five-Year Plan (1966-70)

The second five-year plan beginning in 1966 did not differ much from the first plan, but it did expand a bit on improving the education system and agricultural production. The most important achievement from the first two five-year plans was the construction of more than 1000 kilometres of road. The road that linked Bhutan with the Indian border and the east west lateral road through the heart of the country opened the eastern, western and the entire central region of Bhutan for economic development. There was a significant drop in the road construction budget by 40%, nevertheless, roads continued to receive the highest priority but for the first time agriculture did receive importance, taking up 10% of the total budget for the plan (Planning Commission, second five-year Plan).

The introduction of a modern education system in this plan allowed women for the first time to go to schools. Although numbers were very small, this was a milestone for women because the monastic education system until then had been exclusively male targeted (Black and Stalker, 2006:55).

Third Five-Year Plan (1971-75)

An emphasis was placed on the preservation of culture in the third five-year plan, whereby a budget of 1.5 million was set aside for protection and maintenance of buildings of historical importance, indicating that the idea of cultural preservation is not a new one (Planning Commission, third five-year plan). It is obvious that the Government had started thinking seriously about preserving its cultural heritage as a part of its developmental programmes. One of the major achievements in this plan was increasing agricultural production by strengthening the agricultural extension and administration at the regional and district levels, increasing the area under cultivation, especially in the valleys, and bringing additional areas under horticultural crops. New agricultural farms were set up to provide new agricultural techniques to accelerate agricultural production.

“In houses headed by women, she has to make sure that there is enough to eat in the house, in case of shortfalls, she borrows” (Schicklgruber & Pommaret, 1997:94).

The increase in agricultural production helped women get improved varieties of food at home and also allowed them to produce more on the farm and most of the farms in western Bhutan are inherited by women through the matrilineal system of inheritance.

Fourth Five-Year Plan (1976-81)

One of the major achievements of the Fourth Development Plan was the establishment of district (or *dzongkhag*) planning committees to stimulate greater local involvement, awareness of government development policies, and local development proposals. The committees, however, had no decision-making powers. Agricultural and animal husbandry came to the fore, taking 29 percent of the Nu1.106 billion allocated for the fourth plan (Planning Commission, fourth five-year plan).

The biggest achievement for women was the establishment of NWAB in this plan. Although NWAB came as a result of joining CEDAW in 1980, this was the first step the Government took to look after the welfare of women. The establishment of local planning committees also allowed women to voice their opinions for the first time albeit indirectly. I have observed that in women headed homes, it was most likely that the women would instruct their men on what to say at the local committee meetings (See Chapter 4 for further discussion). The Marriage Act and Inheritance Act were also passed in 1980 and protected women's rights to legal access and justice in cases of divorces and child custody battles. The minimum age for marriage was set at 18 for men and 16 for women. The law allows both men and women to inherit property equally but does not interfere with local practices of the matrilineal system of inheritances.

Fifth Five-Year Plan (1981-87)

The Fifth Development Plan sought the expansion of farmland to increase the production of staple crops, such as rice, corn, wheat, barley, buckwheat, and millet. The plan also emphasized improvements in livestock, soil fertility, plant protection, and farm mechanization. Its total planned allocation was Nu 4.3 billion, but the actual outlay came to Nu 4.7 billion. Financing the planning process grew increasingly complex, as indicated by the fifth plan's multilateral funding sources. However, domestic revenue sources for development planning had increased significantly, and the fifth plan included development projects that would further decrease

dependence on external assistance. Some of the achievements were introducing concepts of self-reliance in each district, decentralization of the development administration, greater public input in decision-making, better control of maintenance expenditures, and more efficient and effective use of internal resources became increasingly important (Planning Commission, fifth five-year plan).

During this plan, the Bhutan Citizenship Act was passed granting equal citizenship rights to both men and women. However, a clause in the act stated that:

“children of Bhutanese men married to expatriates prior to 1985 were automatically eligible for citizenship. In the case of women, however, her husband and children would, according to the law, not be considered citizens of Bhutan” (Marriage Act, 1985).

This act openly created a gender bias favouring men. I would argue that women as the main caretakers of children and in a largely matrilineal society, should have more rights to the children's citizenship and this act is nothing but an attempt to marginalise women in the name of law.

Sixth Five-year Plan (1987-92)

The Sixth Development Plan focused on industry, mining, trade, and commerce (13.3 percent) and power generation projects (13.1 percent), with education's allocation decreasing slightly to 8.1 percent from 11.2 percent during the fifth plan. At Nu 9.5 billion, the sixth plan was considerably more expensive than its predecessor. It included programmes that, if successfully implemented, would mean far-reaching reforms. The goals included strengthening government administration, promoting the national identity, mobilizing internal resources, enhancing rural incomes, improving rural housing and resettlement, consolidating and improving services, developing human resources, promoting public involvement in development plans and strategies, and promoting national self-reliance. Perhaps the key ingredient, self-reliance, promised to provide for more popular participation in the development process and to result in improved rural conditions and services as well as better government administration and human resource development. With greater self-reliance, it was hoped that Bhutan would begin exploiting markets in neighbouring countries with manufacturing, mining, and hydroelectric projects in the 1990s. Faced with rising costs, Bhutan postponed some projects requiring large inputs of capital

until the seventh development plan (1992- 96) (Planning Commission, sixth five-year plan). Overall, the sixth plan is widely considered to be successful with efficient use of external funds and furthering development of domestic institutions for balanced development. A notable achievement was the universal child immunisation in 1990. This plan also prioritised achieving gender balance in the number of enrolments in schools and more equitable coverage across districts. Another important aspect of this plan was the Government's effort to develop approaches aimed at protecting and promoting the vulnerable in society, especially women and children.

Seventh Five-Year Plan (1992-97)

No major changes were prominent in overall sectoral development in the seventh plan. Preliminary planning indicated an emphasis on "consolidation and rehabilitation" of developments achieved under previous plans, more attention to environmental concerns, and enhancement of women's role in economic and social development. This is the first time that women's contribution to development was formally recognized in a plan and policies formulated to integrate women into development programmes. The Government ensured its support for NWAB (National Women's Association of Bhutan) founded in 1981, to implement the new policies and ensure women's participation through provision of better health services, increasing girls' enrolment in schools, providing income generating activities besides improved social welfare and encouraging women's employment in different sectors (Planning Commission, seventh five-year plan).

From their inception, the development plans have been aimed at energizing the rest of the economy and promoting economic self-reliance. Windfall revenues from export receipts normally were used to reduce foreign debt and dependence on foreign aid. Planners also sought to involve the immediate beneficiaries of economic development. Representatives in the National Assembly and district officials were encouraged to become involved in projects, such as roads and bridges, schools, health care facilities, and irrigation works, in their district. Some costs for the projects were borne through self-help, such as households providing labour. Government planners also have endeavoured to increase rural income through initiatives in the farming sector, such as stock-breeding programmes, promotion of cash crops, and advanced agro-technology.

Central government efforts also were aimed at increasing the quality of life by providing electrification, modern water and sanitation systems, better cooking equipment, and insulation for houses. During this plan in 1996, the minimum marriage age for women was raised from 16 to 18 in keeping with the conditions of the CEDAW Act and the concept of Gross National Happiness was introduced in the plans for the first time. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. It was also during this plan that preservation of the cultural heritage was mentioned as a less quantifiable objective of development even though preservation of culture was not the main objective. Another objective included improving education facilities. (Planning Commission, seventh five-year plan).

Eighth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002)

Bhutan's economy grew by 6.5% in the first four years of the plan. The biggest sector to influence the growth was the construction sector with 17.3 % owing to large constructions of major hydro power plants. The agricultural sector exceeded the expected growth rate by 1.3% that came mainly from forestry and cash crop production. This plan placed importance on the expansion of education and preservation of traditional values and Bhutanisation¹⁵ of the curriculum in an effort to educate the youth more about Bhutan (Planning Commission, eighth five-year plan).

Ninth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005)

The ninth plan was more comprehensive and covers much wider development areas than the eighth plan. The Planning Commission's document on the ninth plan referred to the guiding principles of economic developments for the first time and officially named the concept Gross National Happiness (GNH). The concept of GNH for development is discussed in detail shortly.

The 9th five-year plan explains the importance of identifying economic growth and development because of the need to provide infrastructure for the people to engage in economic activities, particularly human resources and the creation of equitable economic opportunities are seen as preventing wide disparities in income and opportunities. This is the first principle of GNH. The second principle of GNH, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage is seen as a means of

¹⁵ School course books were to include more topics on Bhutan history, traditional values and environmental preservation.

protecting the country's sovereignty and independence by '*safeguarding a national identity in a rapidly globalizing world where, cultural values are a source of human beliefs and values critical for sustainable development*'. Preservation of natural resources is described as being essential for sound sustainable development by preventing indiscriminate exploitation and in order to be available for long-term use. Finally, good governance was considered with the intention of establishing a system of governance that promoted the well-being and happiness of its citizens (Planning Commission, ninth five-year plan). The greatest change in governance occurred when the King voluntarily devolved full executive powers to a council of ministers in 2001 and thereafter commanded a drafting of a new constitution.

Other objectives of the plan included alleviating poverty and determining the factors responsible for poverty. Survey reports showed some of the causes of poverty to be lack of adequate size of land holdings, inability to own a decent house, vulnerability to food shortages and lack of sufficient resources to send children to schools. Another objective of the plan included raising the employment rate. The government planned to make rural areas attractive to youths by promoting cooperatives, building infrastructure, and introducing land reforms.

One of the most important objectives in this plan is the introduction of a separate chapter on the importance of women, children and gender equality in the economic development process. The plan included decreasing the child mortality rate with effective primary health care, mother and childcare initiatives, immunisation, reproductive and family planning programmes and access to safe drinking water. This concept of improving women's lives at the initial stage concentrates more on the welfare approach and less on other initiatives. There is detailed strategy on improving the well-being of women including short policy measures concerned with empowering women in educational and employment sectors. According to the review of the past five-year plans, the maternal mortality rate has been brought down by 16% from 2000 to 2005, the enrolment ratio of girls to boys in the ninth year was 93 to 98 girls for every 100 boys in the primary and secondary level. (Planning Commission, ninth five-year plan).

Tenth Five-Year Plan (2008-)

The tenth plan which is due to start this year is more ambitious and covers a range of areas including a special topic on '*Women in Development*', which is a big improvement on the

previous plans. How many of its objectives can be achieved remains to be seen. The chapter on women in development includes all the frameworks, recommendations and guiding principles designed by the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) to improve the situation of women. This is an ongoing process at the moment and any results of these programmes can only be analysed on the completion of the plan in 2013. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5 under gender, culture and development. The strategic framework for the tenth plan is outlined as below:

Poverty reduction

Owing to difficult geographical terrain, it had been very hard to implement equal economic development policies throughout the country. As a result of its mountainous areas where transportation and communication are rare, especially in the rural areas, poverty has been a big concern for the government (Department of Planning, Ministry of Finance and Royal Government of Bhutan, 2004: 35). According to the '*Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*' (Planning Commission, 2004), there has been substantial qualitative and quantitative rural-urban differences in terms of access to social services, basic amenities and economic opportunities. Hence, the tenth plan's main theme is outlined as poverty reduction, which includes meeting global obligations such as Millennium Development Goals developed by the World Bank and United Nations

Impacts of development on women in rural areas

Because of development, there is a significant rise in the use of technology in farms. There is more use of power tillers especially among the richer section. This has led to less use of traditional methods such as oxen ploughing the fields. Rice and wheat threshing are done by machines and in the village where I interviewed, almost every household had one such machine. This has reduced the labour requirement and traditional women who normally stayed at home now venture out to the towns in weekend markets to sell agricultural products. I visited five weekend markets and noticed that almost 80% of the sellers were women. This has led to improvement in their lifestyle because of that extra cash income with which they can buy essential items for their homes. It also improves social interaction with people of different villages improving their range of marriage partners. The village women were also visibly

influenced by the city women's sense of fashion. The Bhutanese women traditionally have short hair like men but younger women in the villages can be seen sporting longer hair even at work such as digging and spreading manure.

However, with a higher number of women being illiterate, there is limited access to public information where they can be better informed about farming methods, public health issues and government procedures. Hence, women are less empowered to find information on markets and job opportunities. There is lack of access to basic information and to communications that could considerably improve the livelihoods of the rural poor and lack of voice and power to shape the decisions that will affect them (Sen, 2004).

Gross National Happiness and Development

Happiness is often used interchangeably with the term quality of life. Just as a human development objective, GNH rejects a singular focus on economic growth and concentrates more on a holistic view of development with an explicit spiritual dimension. The GNH concept identified four pillars as a means to achieve its objective of bringing happiness to the people of Bhutan. The aims and objectives of these four pillars include equity, fairness, compassion, justice, peace and environmental sustainability. Hence, the means to GNH by the Government are set out as follows:

Good Governance: Good governance is a necessity for development of any kind because the stakeholders should be able to hold policy and decision makers accountable for their decisions. One of the most important features of good governance is providing transparency to the people. The Government has tried to follow this principle by live broadcasting of the proceedings of the National Assembly over TV, radio, newspapers and magazines and providing comprehensive information on the government through websites. The system of governance is infused with a strong sense of public ethics. Decentralisation has moved towards delegating powers from the centre by empowering the people to manage their own local developmental challenges. As a part of human rights protection, Bhutan is one of the few countries in the world to meet its 20:20 compact of 20% of public investment in health and education (UNDP and Bhutan, 2006:17). The biggest move has perhaps been the gradual transition from monarchy to democracy with the first parliamentary elections held in March this year.

Socio-economic development: Bhutan still has a high level of poverty by international standards and the rate increases markedly moving across the country from west to east. Here poverty refers not only to shortage of income but also to lack of access to many of the other essential components of a healthy and fulfilling life, such as social services, like education, health care and sanitation and economic services such as technology and markets. The Bhutan Poverty Analysis Report (2004) revealed 31.7% of the population live under the poverty line. Of these 97% are in the rural areas (UNDP and Bhutan, 2007:17). The monthly income poverty line per capita income was calculated as Nu.740 (Black and Stalker, 2006: 14). The Planning Commission Department has come up with a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to combat these shortcomings.

Environmental Conservation: The government has mandated that a perpetual 60 % of the country be left under forest cover. At present the percentage of forest coverage is 72.5% and has remained the same since the development process began in the 1960s. Bhutan is one of the few countries that absorbs more greenhouse gases than it produces. An example of a government policy to reduce environmental degradation has been the encouragement of metal sheets for roofs. The traditional method of roofing had been using wooden planks that needed to be replaced on a yearly basis. It is encouraged to replace firewood by cooking gas and electricity. Numerous trees have been planted every year by students and community participation. Internationally, Bhutan has taken part in the Kyoto Protocol agreement.

Cultural preservation: Bhutanese tradition is regarded as something positive that is connected to protecting the sovereignty of Bhutan by preserving its unique identity of having its own language, code of conduct, dress, architecture and values that shape everyday lives. As a result, culture and tradition are used as a reflection of official recognition of the negative effects of modernization (Ueda, 2000:103). Age-old practices of self-reliance such as producing its own food and bartering surpluses for other essential needs are used as a philosophy in modern Bhutan in order to depend as little as possible on external aid, which can bring the negative effects of modernization and maximise production at home.

The idea of sustainability is based on traditional beliefs that rivers, streams, rocks, mountains and soil are the domain of spirits and that indigenous practices like traditional farming, institutions

that manage community grazing land, forests and local knowledge are seen as vital to preserving nature. They are seen as one of the many intangible aspects of development. This concept is reflected strongly in Bhutan's environmental conservation policies. Rinzin et al (2006: 60) show a clear explanation of Bhutan's middle path strategy that links development policies to preservation of culture. Government policy as shown below is moderate and sustainable:

Figure 1: Web of dependencies within a prudent framework of economic development, ecological and cultural preservation and good governance



Source: Rinzin et al. (2006:55).

Culture and the spiritual heritage are also preserved through the education system by discouraging alienation of the educated from the traditional values. The education system is also used to promote loyalty, pride and commitment to the nation and a feeling of communal harmony based on its rich tradition and culture. This preservation of culture relates to maintaining the nation's identity and hence security. This aspect of GNH using education as a way of preserving culture is discussed in detail in chapter three under education and employment.

The Government's effort to maintain a balance between development and culture and the unwillingness to welcome outside influence is further clarified by Priesner as follows:

"Bhutanese are firmly in the driver's seat of development, while foreign experts are strictly considered advisors with no influence on decision-making. Similarly, it is not uncommon that a development aid is rejected because of attached strings set by donor agencies" (Priesner, 1996:36).

Ueda suggested that culture and tradition are interpreted in two ways. One as something to be preserved i.e. culture and tradition are externalised as if they are tangible entities and the other as a prism where traditional values are used as a criterion to assess developmental activities as good or bad i.e. tradition and culture are intangible and are something to be used (Ueda, 2003:117). The main aim of culture and tradition is seen as enforcing Bhutanese identity survival in the huge face of modernization by articulating Bhutan as being different from the west and the western model of development (Ueda, 2003:138).

I think that in the struggle for cultural preservation, it is the people of Bhutan as a nation who must work together to achieve the Government's unique developmental policies. However, men and women play different roles in society, be they division of labour in work places, participation in management of households, community, local and national affairs or exercising rights. According to feminist writers, cultural and traditional practices have always acted as a barrier to women's access to resources, right to participate in decision-making processes and enjoyment of independence. Similarly, Bhutanese culture and traditions have been both empowering and disempowering for the women of Bhutan. Recognizing cultural practices that disempower women socially and economically, the Government has formulated plans and policies that are outlined in the NCWC report to enable the maximum participation of women at all levels.

These four goals are mutually linked, complementary and consistent. They embody national values, aesthetics and spiritual traditions. Therefore, GNH is designed to balance economic progress with the well-being of the Bhutanese people.

The evidence from UN data suggests that modern economic growth has not improved the subjective well being of the people in high-income countries. For example, from the data of UNDP in 2006, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Human Development Index (HDI) showed Japan in the 18th and 7th position whereas the Happy Planet Index¹⁶ showed Japan to be 95th. For Bhutan, the GDP rank was 137th, HDI 135th and 13th in the Happy Planet Index (The New Economic Foundation: 2006). Despite enormous economic growth, some countries experience deterioration in the quality of life as a result of competitive income difference, stress

¹⁶ The Happy Planet website shows only date and does not give details about how happiness is measured.

due to longer working hours and less rest leading to rising rates of suicide and depression. Frey and Stutzer explained the unsatisfactory link between materialism and happiness in their research for happiness in developed countries such as the United States and Japan. Frey and Stutzer found that:

“Over time, however, happiness in western countries and Japan does not systematically increase, despite considerable growth in real per-capita income. This can be attributed to the rise in aspiration levels going with increases in income. Between countries, and at per-capita income levels much below the United States, higher average income goes with higher average happiness but the improvements in reported subjective well-being seem to be rather small” (Frey and Stutzer, 2002 : 428).

Importance of Gross National Happiness

The earliest five year development plans concentrated on improving the country's infrastructure for education, health and communication and made no mention of women's welfare. However, the idea of Gross National happiness (GNH) started appearing only in the seventh five year plan (1992-1997) where it is mentioned that development is associated not only with Gross National Product but also has many other dimensions such as preserving one's identity through culture and the mental well-being of the people.

The 7th five-year plan emphasized that spiritual and emotional development cannot and should not be defined in materialistic terms. The concept that wealth does not make people happier figures in Ueda's 'Culture and Modernisation' (2003) where she mentions a government document 'Bhutan 2020' which explains the direction of Bhutan's development for the next twenty years. It justifies the argument by suggesting that:

“The concept of Gross National Happiness ...rejects the notion that there is a direct and unambiguous relationship between wealth and happiness. If such a relationship existed, it would follow that those in the richest countries should be happiest in the world. We know that this is not the case. This marginal increase (of the population that consider themselves to be happy) has also been accompanied by growth of many social problems as well as such phenomena as stress-related diseases as well as suicides-surely antithesis of happiness” (Planning Commission, 1999:46 in Ueda 2003; 113).

Hence, the main purpose of the GNH policy of the Bhutanese government is to concentrate on the happiness of the people. The happiness of the people is based on mental satisfaction where materialistic attitudes have less importance and where people must try to live happily within the

means that the country's natural resources allow. Here the aim of the Bhutanese government seems to be achieving one happy community of people living within the means that the country's resources can meet, or as Benedict Anderson puts it as '*imagined community*' of a happy Bhutanese nation. Anderson suggested that a nation

"is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 2006:6-7).

In other words, the government of Bhutan uses '*sustainability*' of its culture as a tool and technique to bring together its citizens towards a common goal of achieving nationalistic attitudes in the face of outside influences that are capable of eroding the nation's identity. The idea of including culture and religion in the sustainable development concept is examined by Ueda where she emphasized that religion and culture became an important part of sustainable development programmes in Bhutan (Ueda, 2003:108).

This sustainability idea was derived from the fact that Bhutan's location was precariously positioned between two giant cultures of China in the north and India in the south. Therefore, unless Bhutan maintains its own identity by protecting its traditional culture and values, Bhutanese culture can easily disappear and be swallowed by these two vast cultures. As Ueda (2003) explains:

"in the government's view, without cultural consciousness, any development programmes and projects will not be sustainable" (Ueda, 2003:110).

Thus, it was very important for the Bhutan government to base its development programmes on local culture. In the words of Esteva and Prakash (1997), the slogan 'Think Globally, Act Locally' rejects the illusion of engaging in global action and:

"This is not mere realism: ordinary people lack the centralized power required for global action. It is a warning against the arrogance, the farfetched and dangerous fantasy of 'acting globally'. It urges respect for the limits of 'local action'. It resists the Promethen lust to be godlike-omnipresent. By clearly defining the limits of intelligent, sensible action, it encourages decentralised, communal power. To make 'a difference', actions should not be grandiosely global but humbly local" (Esteva and Prakash, 1997: 278).

Esteva and Prakash further argue that the strength of people thinking and acting locally lies in the fact that it forges solidarity with local forces, and also opposes the concept of '*global thinking*'

and ‘*global forces*’ threatening local spaces. They provide examples on how to resist the monopolistic nature of giant food companies such as Coca Cola and McDonalds by looking at local alternatives that are healthy, ecologically sound and decentralised in terms of social control. (Esteva and Prakash, 1997: 280-282).

Has the GNH concept made Bhutanese happier?

The latest government survey does not seem to show it to be the case in contrast to the Happy Planet Index that placed Bhutan 13th happiest country in the world. In fact, in spite of the general perception that Bhutanese people are happier than people in most countries given the economic constraints, money plays an important role in keeping people happy. Research by Tashi Choden, Takayoshi Kusago and Kokoro Shirai (2007) showed that financial security was the most important factor for Bhutanese to be happy followed by good health and good family life. 348 people were interviewed for this purpose. It is also possible that many of the participants are poor since many live below the poverty line and it would be natural to wish for financial security in times of poverty.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies’ survey reported in Kuensel newspaper showed that 66% of the participants considered income to be the most important factor to be happy. This was followed by family, health, spirituality and good governance as urgent requirements to be happy. The pilot study also found that men were happier than women, the educated were happier than the illiterate and larger families happier than smaller families. Women felt the burden of work more than men and this burden was felt more in the rural areas and it is also reported that women had less sleep than men, especially women who had young children. The illiterate found more satisfaction than the literate ones with facilities such as health and education provided by the government. This result came from an extensive study of 350 people conducted between October 2009 and January 2007¹⁷ (Dorji, Kuenselonline, 16th January 2009).

At the same time, the same report by Dorji (2009) claimed that the GNH concept does not seem to be applied in practice by the government. Many streets are reported to have bars instead of libraries and parks, people living in the towns are breathing polluted air in spite of the most pristine environment, strong materialistic values are held within villages, farms are emptying out,

¹⁷ This report was based on a study conducted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Bhutan’s main research centre.

speeding up urbanization. These situations question the success of GNH and the government's ability to hold on to a concept that defies human nature (i.e. materialistic attitudes of humans) especially in the present conflicting times when the western concept of economic development has overwhelmed the world and cultural, family and moral values have started taking a back seat. Inglehart explained that the significance of economic growth for development is more than cultural factors. Because there are indicators measuring '*economic growth*' it is dominant while '*cultural growth*' cannot be measured (Inglehart, 1990:15).

One way of looking at this situation would be that although GNH tries to resist outside influences, the influx of western ideas cannot be stopped as long as there is media information such as television, radio, films and magazines that bring in ideas that look cool and glamorous. One way of stopping this inflow of western culture would be regulating media information. But then the Government would be seen in the light of a dictatorship imposing its authority on the people against their wishes, which would be against the very idea of people's happiness. Thus, it is a very tricky situation for the Government to maintain its delicate balance between the ideas of local culture-based development policy and modernization.

In spite of the Government's vigorous promotion of the GNH concept, many people in Bhutan do not seem to understand the meaning of GNH. My own survey on the question of GNH showed that people in general were confused about the concept. It was worse in the rural area where nobody knew what the concept meant. Urban people were more knowledgeable about the concept but they offered their own version of happiness i.e. to have basic necessities in life. For the rural people, not having to borrow from someone else to survive was more important. This confusion about the GNH concept is also reflected in Chewang Rinzin¹⁸ et al's (2005) survey. The survey found that more than half of 775 people interviewed did not understand the principle of GNH.

These incidents show that the Government has a long way to go in informing the population and explaining how GNH should work. Most of the GNH principles are only discussed in print and

¹⁸ Chhewang Rinzin is a Bhutanese researcher who works for the government of Bhutan. His findings were jointly written up with Walter J.V. Vermeulen and Pieter Glasbergen from the Institute of Sustainable Development and Innovation, Netherlands in '*Public Perceptions of Bhutan's Approach to Sustainable Development in Practice*'.

conferences which are held for mostly academic people. Since the majority of Bhutan's population lives in rural areas where most are illiterate, the government will have to look for ways to explain the meaning of GNH in simple layman's terms. Then only can it be claimed that the whole Bhutanese population is guided by the principles of GNH and follow them religiously. Rinzin et al (2005: 66) support this view that people are ignorant of the GNH principles. He clarifies his views as follows:

“This ignorance is greatest among the civil society (64%) followed by market (53%) and state (36%). These findings suggest that the strategy needs to be explained so that the people know the intention of the government policy”

Rinzin et al's report also found that there is a common understanding amongst Bhutanese people that culture is very important, serves as Bhutan's identity and has a symbolic role that separates Bhutan from the rest of the world (Rinzin et al. 2006:60).

For some of the people I interviewed, happiness meant being a good person, which was much more important than accumulating wealth since they have grown up in a society that is deeply religious. From a religious point of view, Buddhist teachings have taught them that good deeds in this life would mean a better life after death or better reincarnation. An 81 year-old woman explained her views about accumulating wealth:

“One should be happy with just enough to live. If there is more, I would like to donate to others. There is no good reward without services to others”.

At this stage, even if the majority of people do not understand the concept of GNH, the Government seems to be doing quite well in implementing its development policies. This could be because about half of the population are illiterate (56.3% women and 39.6% men never attended schools while the rest of the population are either presently enrolled in institutions or are literate) (Bhutan, 2005: 244) and these people put their faith in the Government blindly to decide what is best for them. This is especially evident from the way people expressed their satisfaction with social service facilities provided by the Government (Rinzin, 2006).

My own interviews showed that all participants unanimously agreed that they were very happy with the health services provided, especially that of reproductive care for women. This was evident from some of the feedback below:

“I am very grateful to our government for providing all health facilities and women are getting good reproductive care too” (61-year-old woman).

“Because government has provided very good health facilities, there is very low child mortality rate and fewer women dying at child birth” (53-year-old man, Village representative).

However, having said that I would like to argue that not everyone is happy with the way the Government is forcefully imposing rules such as mandatory use of traditional dress in all public places in the name of cultural preservation. Though there is no literature to back up people’s expression of displeasure at such rules, it is common knowledge within Bhutan that many districts impose penalties on the wearing of western dress in public places such as the markets and roads. Mandatory use of traditional dress on formal occasions and public offices may seem like a wise decision, but such decisions encroach on the private lives of people outside formal occasions and express traces of dictatorship in the nature of Bhutanese Government.

Some of the debates that are going on in the forum of the national newspaper of Bhutan are reproduced here to support the notion that not many Bhutanese know what GNH is even though the concept originated from Bhutan. The comments below also show people’s frustration in understanding the complicated meaning of GNH and the urgency to have the meanings of GNH translated into simple terms so that ordinary people can understand. These comments are made by educated people who live in towns and who can understand Government principles. We can only imagine the state of the majority of people living in rural areas (69.1%).

Comment 1:

“I am wondering if the 4th GNH conference will be discussing the practical and simple solutions to achieving happiness. I have looked at the last three conferences papers and I must tell you that it is really very complicated and is only meant for academic people and not farmers and layman like us.

Should the scholars not focus on simple issues so that we layman and farmers can understand and use it for our day to day life instead of making a long and never ending list and adding more to the list after every conference. The happy scholars are already happy with their papers but where do we layman and farmers stand in the pursuit of happiness. Is it amidst the voluminous writings of the eminent scholars?

Scholars usually want to put indicators and drivers to anything they want to study, without that the scholars are just confident of themselves. It is good and

worthwhile to put indicators and drivers but why that long list. The longer the list the more confusion and more chances of losing track of the main objective. Happiness is a simple goal therefore the drivers and indicators should also be simple and manageable.

Simple things should be the key to Happiness” Posted by pension on July 31, 2008-09-18

Comment 2:

“If they really want to promote happiness and find out what constitutes happiness in the context of Bhutanese people, they should start by asking simple questions and answering those simple questions. They should make it understandable to the laymen who constitute 75% of the Bhutanese population not a only few academicians” Posted by Amal on August 1st, 2008

Comment 3:

“I have already started having doubts over the concept of GNH...whether they are going to be layman centred or scholar centred documents!!!...I don't know how far our commission is successful but they have not even been able to convince our own citizens to forget about the outside world!!!”

“we’ ve (sic) our scholars doing their masters in the GNH concept in other countries when we claim the concept of GNH is ours!!! Isn't it irony? I personally feel people outside should be coming to Bhutan to study GNH not our scholars outside....or is it another method to make money outside and come back to chant gross national happiness!!!...till then best wishes” Posted by alert on August 7th 2008 (Discussion Forum in Kuenselonline, 2008)

Relevance of GNH to the thesis

The issue of using GNH as a guiding principle for good governance has been examined in chapter two using the concept ‘governmentality’. The link between GNH and socio-economic development is discussed in chapter three under employment and education. The importance of general well-being as part of GNH has been analysed in chapter two and the well-being of women in relation to Bhutanese culture and religious beliefs is analysed in chapter four under gender, culture and development. This is because GNH as a term in itself seems gender neutral, but the link between GNH and gender equality can only be visible when GNH is examined in terms of Bhutan’s cultural practices that shape gender roles. This aspect is discussed thoroughly in chapter four under gender, culture and development. However, environmental conservation as a pillar of GNH will not be discussed since it is of little relevance to the discussion in this thesis.

The overall idea that GNH is used as a guide for all development activities is integrated in all aspects of this thesis.

Summary

Bhutan has been trying to maintain a balance between preserving its cultural way of life and its identity and facing the inevitable socio-economic changes. This chapter explored the balancing act the Government performs in adapting to modernization as well as maintaining sustainability. It appears that the government of Bhutan until the 1980s, had been ignorant of gender issues until Bhutan started opening itself to the outside world and became a member of various international organizations such as CEDAW, the United Nations and the World Bank. This is evident from the development policies in which women related issues were briefly addressed in the five-year plans that commenced in the 1980s.

This chapter also focused on the Bhutanese Government's approach to development, which focussed on people's well-being. Bhutan learned from the mistakes of other developed and developing countries' policies. Western approaches that have increasingly emphasized economic growth have had devastating effects on the environment. Economic structural adjustments have led to the widening gap between the rich and poor and the Bhutanese approach to development tries to offer an alternative to this western concept through its Gross National Happiness development policies. Despite these beneficial initiatives, the paternalistic nature of the Bhutanese government with its controlling autocratic policies is an underlying issue.

The earliest development plans of Bhutan were all gender neutral. An analysis of development plans and various reports submitted to CEDAW and United Nations show that pressure from the international organizations, of which Bhutan is a member forced the government to pay special attention to women. These programmes were introduced to meet the '*conditionality*' obligations imposed by the donor agencies as a part of their restructuring programmes. This chapter also emphasises the need to maintain Bhutan's identity through preservation of its own culture. This is a way of resisting westernization and is also a weapon to safeguard itself from the overpowering influence of its two powerful neighbours, India and China. More importantly, the chapter makes it clear that there needs to be further investigation and research on women's position in Bhutan.

3. GENDER AND EDUCATION

Introduction

Access to education empowers women in different ways. Naila Kabeer examined the impact of education on women and found that education boosted individual confidence which in turn promoted bargaining power with men, improved access to knowledge, information and new ideas as well as improving the tools to use this knowledge effectively (Kabeer, 2003:175). In Bhutan education has a different purpose as well as being used as a means to empower women. Education in Bhutan is used by the Government as a tool to inculcate a sense of nationalism and is a means to achieve the objectives of Gross National Happiness, i.e. preserving culture and maintaining sustainability. People are educated about government development policies through a planned curriculum for students. This section will deal with the Bhutan Government's objectives of providing education, existing gender gaps in school enrolments and the reasons for them, literacy rate, and the relationship of education and labour participation and the employment situation in Bhutan. An analysis of various opinions on education and employment will be provided from both an urban and a rural point of view. Data analysis will be drawn from three sources; government statistics, other research, on-line comments and my fieldwork interviews.

Education Overview

Education in general is provided to develop human skill and knowledge resources that are essential for any development programme. For example, education for a developed country like New Zealand is a primary mechanism for developing skills within the population and the Government has made it compulsory for those aged 6 to 16 (New Zealand Statistics, 2008). For the developing countries, education is a mechanism to improve economic growth where knowledge and skills are critical. With an improved economy comes a better standard of living, a more effective public sector and a better investment climate. For instance, the World Bank encourages good tertiary education so that people respond to meaningful allocation of resources, which in turn can stimulate economic growth.

The importance of education is emphasized by the World Bank as:

“central to development and a key to attaining the Millennium Development Goals. It is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and lays a foundation for sustained economic growth. The World Bank's strategic thrust is to help countries integrate education into national economic strategies and develop holistic education systems responsive to national socio economic needs. The World Bank is committed to help countries achieve Education For All (EFA) and, through Education for the Knowledge Economy (EKE), build dynamic knowledge societies” (World Bank, 2008a).

The benefits of education are immense for both individuals and society as a whole. Sandy Baum and Kathleen Payea (2005) found that higher levels of education brought higher earnings for all racial/ethnic groups as well as men and women, the income gap between high school graduates and college graduates increased and the benefits of completing a bachelor's degree were significantly better than those of attending only post secondary schooling. Baum and Payea also found that these individual benefits brought about both monetary and non-monetary benefits to society. Societal benefits included lower levels of employment and poverty, lower smoking rates, better personal health perceptions and higher levels of civic participation, including volunteer work. Lawrence H. Summers¹⁹ (1992) argued that investing in women's education had a fivefold benefit. Educating women reduced child mortality, reduced fertility, reduced maternal mortality, helped prevent spread of AIDS and had important environmental benefits. In 2005, 72 million school age children worldwide were still not in school and the majority of them were found to be girls. 41 million girls were not enrolled and 70% of these girls came from “socially excluded groups” (Lockheed²⁰, 2008: 115).

Indian education and its relation to the Bhutanese education system

Bhutan's education system was adopted from the Indian system and it is important to discuss the role of education for women in India as the Indian system has a huge influence on Bhutan. In India, Bhutan's closest neighbour and biggest development partner, the national policy of the Indian education system emphasized that education was necessary for democracy and central to improving women's conditions. The policy was built on the concept that everyone irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex has access to education of comparable quality (Ministry of

¹⁹ Lawrence H. Summers was the Vice President, Development Economics and Chief Economist at the World Bank.

²⁰ Marlaine Lockheed works for the Center for Global Development.

Education, India, 1986). The policy also advocated using education as an agent for providing equality for women through its positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Part IV, section 4.2 and 4.3 of the policy on ‘*Education for Equality*’ clearly states that:

“It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, text books, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational institutes. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutes encouraged to take up active programmes to further women’s development. The removal of women’s illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time targets and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women’s participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereo-typing in vocational and professional courses and to promote women’s participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies” (Ministry of Education, India, 1986, modified in 1992).

A direct outcome of the Indian education policy according to N. Mohan²¹ and R Vaughan²² (2008) was the programme for women’s empowerment implemented across several Indian states since 1989. The title of the programme was known as *Mahila Samakhya* meaning ‘*woman speaking with equal voice*’. The aim of the programme was to educate women and help them to question rather than accept, enabling them to affirm their own potential that can move from situations of passive assertion to collective action and thus instigate social changes in their favour (Mohan and Vaughan, 2008: 186).

Mohan and Vaughan noted a significant change in the state approach to the education of girls and women between independence in the late 1940s and recent times. The state approach offered a new construction of the Indian female citizen with the National Policy for Education (NPE)’s unprecedented step towards changing their position in Indian society, whereas previous government approaches had affirmed the constitutional aims of women’s education, but had either ambiguous reasons or had largely referred to a need to improve women’s roles as wives and mothers. In spite of all the changes, Mohan and Vaughan argue that a subtle shift in

²¹ Nitya Mohan is a doctoral candidate in Cambridge University and worked with the UNDP country office in India and the ILO (Geneva).

²² Rosie Vaughan is a PhD student in Cambridge University in the Education Faculty currently conducting her doctoral research on the relationship between international organizations and the Indian government in the promotion of girls’ education.

women's education is evident. This shift was noted in the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), a policy developed in 2001 after a decade of participation in the international 'education for all' campaign. The SSA framework did little to acknowledge the transformative power of education in relation to gender patterns and identities in Indian society and gave little attention to the curriculum or that teacher training should include gender sensitive content. The female empowerment concept was less frequently used and by 2005, Mohan and Vaughan suggested that the notion of empowered female citizen was less defined in that instead of:

“ascribing a role to women in breaking down pervasive unequal structures throughout society, more emphasis was placed on the role of empowerment in girls and women achieving equal educational participation” (Mohan and Vaughan, 2008:186-187).

These shifts have been blamed on changes in political leadership and the competing visions of women's role in the modern Indian state. Mohan and Vaughan provided the example of the Indian Government's attempt in 1998-2004 to grapple with the force of 'westernization' by introducing a curriculum of interpreting tradition through schools. There was a traditional interpretation of women's role in society whereby the best qualities of Indian womanhood and an unproblematic view of gender relations were maintained, and the goal was to nurture the best features of each gender in the best Indian tradition.

According to Ueda (2003), Bhutan started modern education in the 1950s with the adoption of the Indian Education System. The situation was unavoidable because of an acute shortage of teaching staff in Bhutan. Even the whole curriculum was imported from India. English became the medium of instruction because most of the higher education of Bhutanese took place in India and they had to be prepared for the Indian University system thus raising the question of the relevance of education to Bhutanese needs (Ueda, 2003:48,125). The relevance to Bhutanese needs was discussed vigorously in subsequent five-year plans and several changes have been introduced. These changes are reflected in the change in recent curricula. During my school days, we used to study world history and Indian history as a part of our history courses. Nowadays, I can see the changes in our children's textbooks. English textbooks are re-written and Bhutanese history and environmental studies are part of their course books.

These changes are also reflected in the Government's education policy and written down as follows in the general statistic book:

“the curriculum at the secondary level has been adapted to the Bhutanese situation....the reform of the curriculum for English, Dzongkha and mathematics started during the 9th Five Year plan. This will continue into the 10th plan, especially for Dzongkha and Mathematics” (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2006:8).

Modern education started only in the 1950s and monastic education continued to play an important part in the national culture (Ministry of Education, 2008). The earliest attempt to provide modern education to students was the first king's effort to send students to India for further education in 1918 (Aris, 1994: 106). Modern education began initially with the aim of fulfilling self-sufficiency in educated personnel for development programmes and then consequently moved to improving the quality of education in the first three five-year plans. Enrolment in the initial stage was so poor that the third five-year plan expected to close down some of the schools because of poor attendance (Ueda, 2003:120-121). In 1960, the total number of students enrolled in 11 schools was 400, however records on the gender ratio during that time are unavailable.

Gender Disparity in Enrolments

The law does not distinguish between boys and girls in acquiring education but because of the lower rate of girls' enrolment, the concept of community primary schools across the remote parts of the country has helped increase girls enrolment. The National Statistical Bureau (2007) record shows 102 community schools in the 1970s and 245 in 2006. No earlier record is available on the number of community schools.

Community schools help offset the disadvantages of long distance travel to schools and Table 2 gives an idea of the gradual increase in school enrolments for both boys and girls. Most notable is the decrease in the gender gap. For example, girls made up of 26% of all enrolments in 1995 and 43% in 2007.

Table 2: Enrolment in Higher Secondary Schools from 1995 to 2007

Year	Boys	Girls	Total	Annual Growth Rate (%)
1995	337	120	457	0
1996	501	187	688	51
1997	659	273	932	35
1998	673	287	960	3
1999	953	431	1384	44
2000	1299	641	1940	40
2001	1813	991	2804	45
2002	2777	1700	4477	60
2003	3516	2288	5804	30
2004	4060	2631	6691	15
2005	4598	3086	7684	15
2006	4734	3368	8102	5
2007	4987	3829	8816	8

Source: Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education (2007).

Additional new policies added to the education system were the introduction of programmes for inclusive education for children with physical, intellectual and sensory impairments. This system is fairly new with the first visual impairment school established in early 1980s with technical assistance from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and a project funded by the Danish government known as DANIDA. This school provides boarding facilities to students within the institutions and students could attend schools within the compounds of the institution. A unit for the hearing impaired was introduced in the capital city in a lower secondary school that started with ten students. These programmes were initiated with the following objective which was to:

“Establish a program of inclusive education (for children who are physically and mentally challenged) to enable them to partake in the general education that is provided to all children so that they could live with dignity and participate in the development of the Bhutanese society” (Planning Commission, ninth five-year plan).

Another important objective of the Education Department is to maintain sustainability. Sustainability is one of the main criteria for GNH philosophy. The concept requires that all development should be consistent with environmental and cultural values and that it should enhance the ability to make best use of the country's own resources to support self-sufficiency. These important aspects are reinforced through a set of uniform curricula that includes environmental studies beginning in year III and agriculture is an extra activity in schools that have boarding facilities. The curricula of the education system are set in a way that enables the objectives of development policies are to be achieved. A uniform system of education is adopted throughout the country and students are required to study prescribed uniform curricula until they reach high school.

The World Bank reported on Bhutan's achievement in the education sector as a result of their support and supported Bhutan's 'Vision 20/20' which aimed to improve the quality of life for its citizens:

"With the World Bank's support, Bhutan just completed the Second Education Project which assisted in building and strengthening physical and institutional capacity for basic education. This enabled more children, particularly in rural areas, to receive high quality education" (World Bank, 2008b).

The main results were:

- 29 percent increase in the gross enrolment rate for basic education
 - increase in the passing scores in grade 6 and 8 from 83% in 1998 to 98% in 2004
 - increased availability of teaching and learning materials
 - improved teacher training and improvements to in-service teacher training
 - strengthened management and monitoring as well as better decentralized participatory planning; and
 - increase in the number of hostel places for girls
- (World Bank 2008b).

Examinations

Children going to school start sitting yearly exams as soon as they start their pre primary education at the age of six and children are screened as to whether they should move on to the next level based on their exam marks. The Bhutanese Board of Examinations (BBE) conducts

national exams for year VIII and X. Year VI exams are conducted by schools based on questions, answers and marking models provided by the BBE (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2006). Thus, the education system of Bhutan has a system of creating failures and successful people even at a very young age. This concept contrasts starkly with the very principle of GNH i.e. to improve the general well-being of the people. If people are prevented from moving forward as a result of these exams, then the very purpose of achieving universal education for all will be in vain as some students are bound to drop out after repeated failures. John Bowden²³ (2004) argued that exams may be connected to a higher rate of dropouts if students are frustrated by failing exams or expecting to fail exams.

The examination system at the primary level in Bhutan is in contrast to education systems in developed countries such as New Zealand, where students do not have to sit exams until they reach High School²⁴. The absence of exams in the early stages of learning in schools at least enables students to complete their basic education without conditions. The purposes of exams may be to screen out skilled and qualified labour force but I would argue that exams serve no purposes since students passing out from a primary level of education are more unlikely to go in search of gainful employment. This argument is supported by the outcome of my interview on the purpose of education for rural people discussed shortly. In contrast, the absence of exams would at least help to increase the literacy rates. The purposes of achieving Millennium Development Goals and the domestic goal of universal education for all have more chances of being fulfilled. Earlier five-year plans focussed on increasing the literacy rate. The third Five-year (1972-1977) Plan's objective of education emphasized quality as well as quantity, i.e. human resources equipped with better qualifications and working skills.

Education Goals

Education seems to have two purposes for Bhutan, one to fulfil international obligations and the other for domestic reasons. Ever since Bhutan joined the United Nations (UN) in 1971 Bhutan has adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set by the UN organization as a part of its development policies and has slowly embedded the goals in its pursuit for Gross National

²³ John Bowden is a Senior Research Analyst for Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission in Olympia, Washington

²⁴ My children have been enrolled in New Zealand schools and my son started sitting exams in his first year of High School.

happiness. The MDG goals in Bhutan started around the same time as the fourth king started speaking more often about national happiness. The king at his coronation speech in 1974 said ‘*Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product*’. The MDG goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, and ensuring environmental sustainability, which are all on track and running according to the government view (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, November 22nd 2008). However, the MDG report has pointed out the need to pay attention to providing tertiary education to both male and female to achieve gender equality.

One of the most important objectives of the Bhutan Government in providing education is to meet the MDG goals by the year 2015. This is set as a target in a publication by the Bhutanese Government (Bhutan, 2005). At the same time, the Bhutan Government itself acknowledges that there is a lot to be done to bridge the gender gap both in higher levels of learning and in dropout rates as noted in the Bhutan Report to CEDAW Committee (2004) and Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB (2007) Reports.

For the Education Department, the objective of primary education in Bhutan is to teach basic literacy and numeracy and to spread knowledge of the country’s history, geography, culture and traditions and also to teach the fundamentals of agriculture, health and hygiene and population and education (Ministry of Education, 2006). Education is recognized as a basic right to achieve wider social, cultural and economic goals and the objective of providing education for all has been looked on as a fundamental need to achieve Gross National Happiness (GNH). This is achieved through ‘*value education*’ also known as ‘*moral education*’, which tries to promote patriotism, awareness of Bhutanese culture, tradition and good manners and consideration for others (Ueda, 2003:131).

Purposes of Monastic Education

The reason for discussing monastic education is that monastic education was exclusively for boys before modern education came to Bhutan. During the period of the monastic education system, every household which had three sons was required by law to send one boy as a monk (Dargye, no date:1). Thus, women were left out of the education programme entirely. Another

reason to discuss monastic education is that it plays an important part in Bhutan's effort to preserve culture and religion in Bhutan. Earlier, monastic education was the only way of acquiring literacy and scholarship but with modernization, these purposes have been achieved by the modern system of education. Now, the ultimate purpose of monastic education is to be able to progress spiritually and maintain and sustain the state religion i.e. Buddhism. Students are required to learn mundane arts and skills that are associated with Buddhist teachings. According to Dr. Dargye (no date) monks are trained in religious teachings that guide an individual to release him or herself from the cycle of suffering and existence.

The education department has no concern with monastic affairs and most monastic education runs under the Central Monastic Body. Here monastic students refer to the monks and the nuns. Table 3 shows the existing gap between boys and girls in monastic schools. This could be because traditional practices favour girls being kept at home as helpers and caregivers by their parents.

Table 3: Number of Monastic Students and Students by gender in 2006

Monastic Schools	Students	
	Boys	Girls
Enrolments		
362	9199	88

Source: RGOB Education: General Statistics (2007:40).

The monastic body had 5000 monks supported by the state and 3000 monks living on private patronage (Ueda, 2003:143). This is not surprising as almost every aspect of Bhutanese lives is dictated by religion and by nature, Bhutanese are very religious people, so a high number of monks is to be expected. It is very difficult to provide a detailed discussion on the monastic education system owing to lack of research in Bhutan and written materials at least in a foreign language. It is very difficult to get access to works that have been published in Dzongkha (national language) because they are either lying in monasteries or in the national library within the country. However, I can comment on the role of monks within Bhutanese society based on my observations during my fieldwork. I have noticed that people both in the urban and rural areas always consult a religious man in various events such as selecting a favourable day for

marriage, selecting a favourable time to begin construction and advising sick people on what needs to be done i.e. what kind of religious rituals should be performed and referral to doctors.

The roles of the monks seem to be two fold. One is to devote their lives to a lifetime of learning, prayers and meditation so that their hardships could benefit other sentient beings, and in the process free themselves from human sufferings, and achieve Nirvana (free oneself from all attachments and evils in life). This objective is self-serving in the sense that the real beneficiary will be the monk himself. The other role of the monk is for the community in general. Monks preside over any religious ceremonies conducted within the country. In the villages and cities, monks are called upon to perform religious rituals such as funeral rites, reciting prayers for the sick to ward off evils or evoke timely rain etc. Further, monks keep alive the traditional practice of the monastic education system and are a symbol of the deeply flourishing religion of the country, Buddhism. Monks are also seen performing prayers for the safety, security and peace of the country in times of unrest.

From what I have observed (and having seen my own nephew join the monastic body), boys as young as six years of age are enrolled in the monasteries. These children are too young to understand what is happening in their lives. Normally, senior monks from a village take young boys under their wings at the initial stage until they develop enough to form their own circle of friends. The parents find comfort in the fact that they have someone they know to whom they entrust their children's care. Many of these young monks seem to be sent to monasteries because parents could not afford to send their children to schools and for some it is a matter of social pride to have a person of religion in the family.

Education in Bhutan is free until high school level, however for some families it is even difficult to buy the school uniforms and stationery year after year and pay nominal school fees. In other words, poverty seems to be one reason young children get into monastic bodies. To be a monk, all the parents have to do is buy the first set of monastic robes and the rest is taken care of by the Government. However, if at any point of time a monk chooses to withdraw from the monastery and lead an ordinary life, he will have to pay a fine as prescribed by the monastic law and he is normally branded with a name (Getey) that informs the community that he is an ex monk.

A religious person in Bhutan commands high respect from society. An ex monk normally loses that respect and the name 'Getey' signifies his fall from grace. In the village in which I

conducted my interviews, most households had a monk enrolled in the monastic body or a monastery. All these boys were enrolled when they were very young and half of them have become Geteys. At least the families are saved from the burden of feeding too many mouths at these young monks' growing stages. There was only one nun from the whole village and she herself chose to join the nunnery when she was old enough to make her own decisions.

Education and Culture

From the fifth five-year plan, besides the role of providing trained manpower, education was given an additional role of preserving and promoting the country's cultural and spiritual heritage and the same objective was followed in the following five-year plans. The monastic education is seen as a part of overall development trend in which culture and tradition have been increasingly emphasized (Planning Commission, fifth five-year plan).

A further development in the education system is the Simtokha Rigshung School established in 1961 with a vision to preserve and promote traditional culture. It was renamed the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies (ILCS) and the main medium of education is Dzongkha. The aim of the Institute is to produce '*modern Bhutanese with traditional knowledge*' (Royal University of Bhutan, 2008). Modern education usually means western education as the main sector of education is predominantly in the medium of English. The ILCS teaches Dzongkha (Bhutanese language), Buddhist Philosophy, folk music, mask dancing, astrology, and Buddhist painting (Ueda, 2003, 141) which are part of the Government's effort to preserve culture and tradition and the classes are conducted in one of the oldest fortresses in Bhutan giving the students a feel of the cultural heritage surrounding them. Initially, the school enrolled lay people who did not want to join the monastic body but are interested in studying Buddhist philosophy through the Dzongkha medium. Students who were attending the modern education system can drop out anytime and enrol in the ILCS. Even at the ILCS, English is taught as a part of their courses. Some students can also join ILCS after they have completed High School and then move on to pursuing a degree in Dzongkha. The institution catered exclusively for boys and co-education was introduced in 1989. Table 4 shows the gender enrolment in 2007. However, even here it is evident that men outnumber women both at the high school and degree level and the percentage

of male enrolment is higher at the higher level. Women at High School level accounted for 37% and 36% at the degree level.

Table 4: Number of Students by level of Programme and Gender in 2007 (ILCS)

Level of Programme	Below XII	Diploma	Degree	Post Graduate
Male	163	0	50	0
Female	97	0	28	0
Total	260	0	78	0

Source: Royal University of Bhutan (2008:20).

Men have always dominated Dzongkha teaching jobs and starting co-education in this institution has given women an opportunity to compete with the men in a similar occupation. The College of Education in Paro, which trains teachers, recorded 14 men and 1 woman Dzongkha teacher at the postgraduate level but had 62 female teachers and 53 male teachers at the degree level (Royal University of Bhutan, 2008:26). This is the first time in any enrolment statistics that women outnumbered men. It is a normal perception that teaching is more suitable for women because of their nurturing role as mothers and caregivers to children. However, the overall low rate of women teachers can be explained by the fact that it took time for women to enrol in schools and because of the lower number of girls graduating from higher levels of education.

Four other institutions have been set up where the medium of education is Dzongkha, the National Institute of Traditional Medicine, the School of Fine Arts and Crafts, the Royal Academy of Performing Arts and the Trashi Yangtse Rigney School. However, the enrolment in the modern education system heavily outnumbers the enrolment in Dzongkha medium institutions. In 2007, these Dzongkha institutions and other training institute students numbered 4739 (3%) whereas the English medium schools had 152,194 (97%) students. The boys and girls enrolment in schools was 77,911 (51%) boys and 74,283 (49%) girls. However, as the level of education went up, the ratio between male and female widened. For example, Sherubtse College, which offers a Bachelor's degree, had 699 (67%) males and 346 (33%) females, the overall enrolment in institutions was 3,168 (67%) males and 1571 (33%) females (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2006:17).

Perception towards Education

In Bhutan, the perception of education is very different in urban and rural areas as will be explained shortly. This section discusses the impact of modern education on the urban and rural people and their views towards educating their children. Written resources and my own fieldwork interviews will be used to analyse Bhutanese people's views about education in Bhutan and the causes of dropout and low enrolment in schools will be discussed based mostly on my research work. According to Ueda (2003), people's views about education have changed. Earlier, monastic education was a sign of being well-educated and now English medium education has replaced these views. An influx of novels from English speaking countries and films has changed the way people think about women. The notion that women need to be protected was not prevalent in the past but such influences have portrayed women as shy and weak creatures. The impact of modern education not only changed gender perceptions but also had an impact on other traditional beliefs. Quoting Karma Ura²⁵, people have developed more faith in modern medicine. People relied on religious practitioners for every occasion, such as basic education, healing, governing villages and providing moral and ethical guidance.

These days, the path to successful jobs and finance is seen through education leading to a dramatic increase in enrolments both in the urban and rural areas. The lives of young children changed and education made them realize that they have a choice about their own future besides depending on the traditional practice of living off farms. The examination procedures have defined winners and losers introducing the '*ladder of success*' (Ueda, 2003:146-147). People's perception of success has changed over time. Before, people were considered rich if they had large land holdings. They could live their life well on their farms and any extra production could be sold to buy any other essential or luxury items. Education was not a necessity as Priesner puts it, in the 1960s '*education was considered a luxury unnecessary for survival*' (Priesner, 1996:25). These perceptions have changed over time and both the rural and urban population have started giving importance to education in order to be successful in life. The Population and Housing Census (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005) Report shows total female literacy of the country as 48.7% whereas male literacy rate was

²⁵ Karma Ura is National Council member and also a Director and Researcher for the Centre for Bhutan Studies and is an author of many articles on Gross National Happiness.

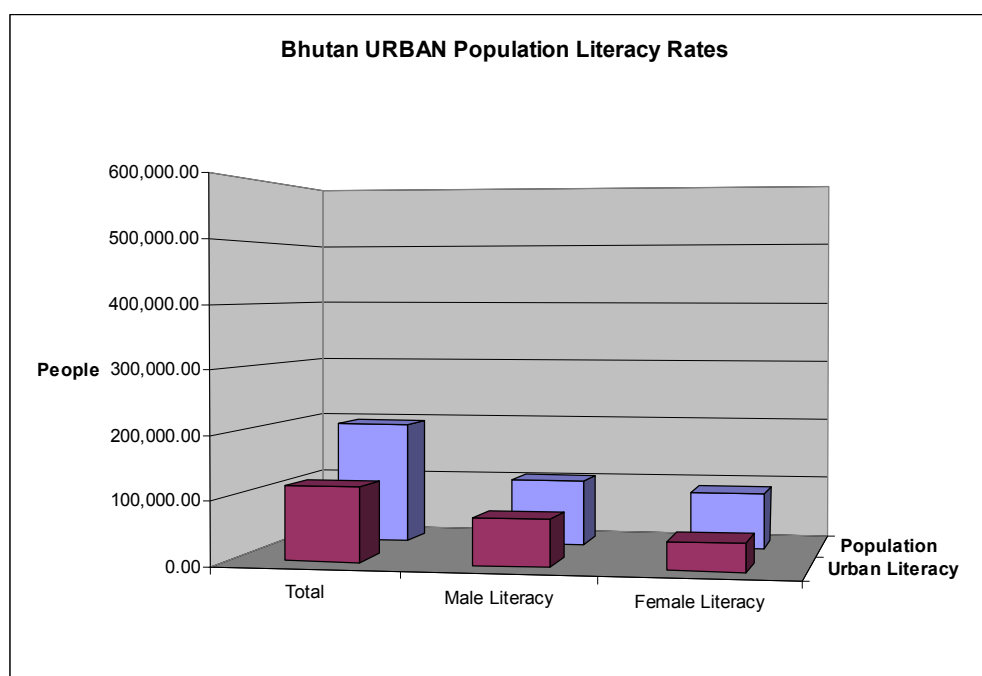
69.1%. Of these totals, 75.9% of the urban population were found to be literate whereas in the rural area, only 52.1% were literate. The average literacy rate of the whole population was 59.5% (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005:241-243). There is a huge gap in the literacy rate for men and women in both the urban and rural areas. The urban literacy rate of men was 83% whereas in rural areas it was 62.6%. For women, urban literacy was 67.67% and in the rural area it was 40.57% (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005:253). The table below shows the literacy gap in Bhutan as a whole and between urban and rural areas and the gender division of literacy rates.

Table 5: Literacy Breakdowns

Literacy of population								
	Population	Pop Male	Pop Female	Total	Male Literacy	Female Literacy	Non-Literate Male	Non-Literate Female
Whole Country	634,982	333,595	301,387	377,289	230,514	146,775	103,080	154,611
Rural	438,982	228,036	210,835	260,249	157,572	102,676	70,463	108,158
Urban	196,111	105,559	90,552	117,040	72,941	44,098	32,617	46,453

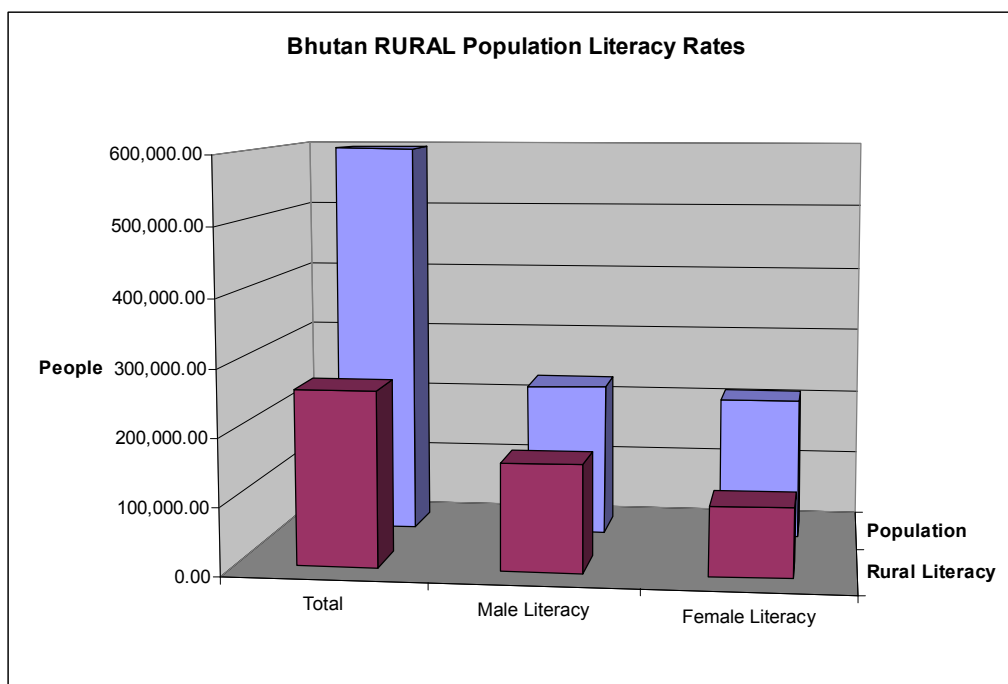
Source: Royal Government of Bhutan Office of the Census Commissioner (2005:241-243,253).

Figure 2: Total Urban Literacy Rates



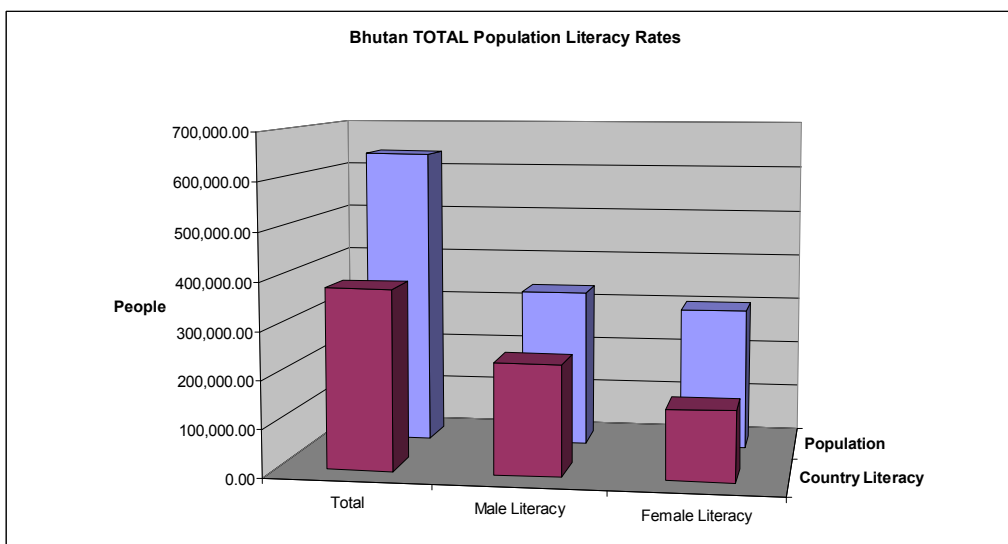
Source: Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner (2005:241-242, 252).

Figure 3: Total Rural Literacy Rates



Source: Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner (2005:241-243, 253).

Figure 4: Total Population Literacy Rates



Source: Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner (2005:241-243, 253).

Government Policy on Education

Policy wise, it seems that the Bhutan government is making every effort to reduce the gender gap in the literacy rate and trying to achieve universal education in keeping its obligations to the Millennium Development Goals. A UNICEF study on education in Bhutan states:

“the government anticipates further improvements, and in the current five year plan (2002-2007) has set sights on achieving universal primary education, defining this as gross enrolment of 100%” (Black and Stalker, 2006:44).

In Bhutan, the reasons for educating children vary a lot between rural and urban areas. From the interviews I conducted in the city and in a village, urban educated people educate their children to enable them to get a good job later in life. They felt girls should be educated as much as the boys because having educated women in the house enabled a household to do better socially, financially and economically as the women spend more time with younger members of the family and women could teach them during their growing stage. The urban people also felt that educating women would empower them to be able to decide their own future and be able to stand on their own feet. A high official in the government has this to say:

“I am totally for educating women because I am a firm believer that educating women would be educating our whole household as they have a vital role to play at home.”

There is an indication in his statement that even if women were educated, he would expect them to carry on the role of being a homemaker i.e. the purposes of educating women seem to be educating the family and not necessarily as an empowerment for the women themselves in public life.

The government should do more to improve the structural conditions of the villages if the gender gap as well as the urban rural gap in enrolments is to be decreased. During my field work, I have observed that there are vast inequalities between the students in the cities and students in the villages. City students have many choices in selecting schools and some went to private schools where the parents could afford to pay higher fees. Students travelled in cars, they are dropped and picked up from schools and those who did not own a car could simply walk shorter and safer distances to schools.

Rural Perception of Education

In rural areas, the idea of providing education for women was to provide women with more confidence and be able to read and write so that women can better face the world outside their community. Employment did not matter much because women had their property to fall back on. I talked to ten people from ten households, five men and five women. This is what they had to say about the importance of education. An eighty-year-old woman who headed the household talked about the children in the house during my interview:

“Women’s role is to care for animals, cook, wash clothes and rear children. I prefer educating the boys more than the girls because daughters have to look after the household. But it also depends, if the girl is more intelligent then I would give the option to her. I think it is very important to provide education to both boys and girls as long as they can keep going. In my house, my girls have proved to be useless in schools dropping out halfway and getting pregnant to unknown fathers. There are dropout girls in our village because of seniors bullying them in school, some are attracted by the glamour of the city girls, some drop out because of manpower shortage at home and some because they are spoiled by their parents. Our girls try to copy the city girls and then many of them are taken advantage by men and some of them end up being single mothers further driving them into poverty. Girls also drop out because they get the feeling that they are not as capable as the boys and if they fail their exam once or twice then they discontinue study due to embarrassment in front of their peers”.

The participant also seemed to be disheartened by the fact that girls in her family could not continue their education thus further reinforcing traditional beliefs that women are incapable of venturing into male dominated areas and the proper place for women is within the household. This brings into focus the Government’s need to educate society to change traditional perceptions of confining women within the household. The respondent seemed more concerned with women rearing children and doing housework rather than encouraging women’s education. Her feedback also reflects the fear and anxiety faced as result of bullying, the need to protect women against sexual vulnerabilities and the outcome of modernization i.e. fear of unemployment. This interview also addresses the lack of confidence that village women face and the sense of inferiority they feel compared with the more educated people in the city which shapes the rural perception of girls. Such sentiments are shared by many others in the rural area in Bhutan as I spoke to more people. From this, it looks as if it will take some more time for the rural people of Bhutan to change their stand on educating women. All the respondents in the

village agreed that to be able to read and write was important for women but were less willing to educate them.

Another fifty-year-old woman from the same village said she wanted girls to be educated because she herself was uneducated and did not know anything besides housework. She had seen other women who had knowledge about using technology and *“this proved that women are not as dumb as they are made out to be”*. Another woman said education is important because for her it was like groping in the dark once she stepped out of her house and she had to depend on others even to identify a single piece of paper.

Men in the rural area had a better opinion about women than women themselves. A ninety year old village architect said uneducated women are more vulnerable because of their ignorance and are easily taken advantage of by men. Another man who has a strong influence in the village and who is fifty three years old said educated women have proved that they are as capable as men and in some cases have proved to be better than men in decision making situations:

“We always thought women cannot advance as well as men and we have been proved wrong. So it is very important that we educate our women”.

Other respondents from the village wanted to educate their girls not because they wanted girls to go out and get a job but because girls will develop more confidence when they step out of their household and would be able to read and write. Jobs did not seem to be important for girls because they had the inheritance to look after (discussed in the next section under employment). Boys in the meantime were expected to do well with schooling because they would eventually leave the house without inheriting anything and will have to look for their own means of survival.

From the above analysis of interviews, it can be concluded that the purpose of education for women brought out two differing objectives of education. From my research work, I found out that the main purposes of acquiring an education for urban people seems to be ensuring employment and financial security in future and for the rural people, their main purpose of acquiring education was to be able to read and write and gaining employment did not seem so important. In order to improve rural literacy, the government has introduced a non-formal system of education known as the NFE (Non Formal Education). This system is aimed at rural people

who do not have time to attend schools but can find some time in the evenings and weekends to attend classes. The Education Ministry has noted that more women participated in the NFE programme than men. In 2007, there were 10 002 women and 4 692 men who attended this course all over Bhutan (RGOB Education: General Statistics, 2007:36). This indicates that more women are becoming aware of the importance of education

Causes of the low level of girls' enrolment in rural Bhutan

Even though no comprehensive survey has been conducted so far on the reasons why a higher number of girls in the rural areas either drop out of schools or remain at home (except for one study carried out by the Youth Development Fund, shown in table 6), the Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee (2004) talked about hardships faced by rural women in being able to attend schools. Some the reasons mentioned in the Report were long distance travel between home and schools and poverty. However, the situation is clearer from the case study discussed below:

Case Study of students living in a village in western Bhutan

In a village in western Bhutan, a housewife's daughter aged 11, sons aged 9 and 7 go to a community school about an hour's walk from the house. In summer, the area is infested with leeches of all sizes, some as big as a finger and flies (gnats) that bite human and cattle alike. The farm work is hectic and the children get up as early as the parents do in the morning. They quickly throw some water on their face, wipe them with a piece of cloth and have their breakfast composed of red rice and fiery hot chilly curry. The leftover is packed in plastic boxes and taken to school for lunch. The children try to run as fast as possible to avoid leeches getting stuck on their legs. Halfway, some bigger students from a neighbouring village on route to the same school await them behind bushes and then bully the housewife's children out of their packed lunch and any pocket money they have. If the children put up any resistance, then the senior students beat them up and their lunch is lost in any case. An hour later, they reach their school sweating and out of breath. Their shoes soaked in mud and their uniforms half wet from the water drops from the bushes that brush them on the way. As soon as they reach school, they have to start sweeping their classrooms and surroundings. After the cleaning session, they have their morning prayers and start their day's classes often physically punished by the teachers for either not doing their homework or being naughty in classes. In the evening, after school, they come back the same way and on the way, the children are again warned by the bullies not to tell anyone about the incidents. The children reach home hungry and tired, they have a few minutes to eat some leftovers that the parents have left behind and then have to start helping the parents with household chores and gathering cattle that have been sent out for grazing. By dinnertime, the children are too tired to do any homework and fall asleep immediately little worried about the punishment they face next day for neglecting their homework again.

I have observed that many rural school children go through similar hardships. The children are lucky if their village lies near the school. Because of such hardships, the parents prefer sending boys to school as they are seen to be more capable of defending themselves. Parents pity their daughters and are more comfortable keeping them at home under their care. This household case is a typical example of how rural conditions influence decisions to send children to school. The daughter is still going to school only because she is more intelligent than the two boys. The housewife has arranged to keep her niece at home so that she can take over the household and look after the property when she becomes old. The housewife's elder boy has already dropped out of school and joined a monastery to be a monk and the younger son had failed in school for the past four years. He is not expected to do well but will eventually drop out of school, marry and lead his life in the household he marries into. It had never entered the housewife's mind to keep her son to take charge of the household. Traditionally, it had always been girls who inherited property and the housewife wants to follow the age-old practice of a woman taking charge of the inheritance.

Finally, it can be concluded that it is not only cultural factors that are responsible for wider gender gaps in school enrolments especially in rural areas, but also there are many other factors that influence the existing statistics. Lack of structural facilities such as proper transport, roads and schools nearby is a cause for anxiety for parents. For those parents whose daughters have to travel long distances to schools, parents suffer from anxiety, worry about their daughters being bullied on the way to schools and fear their daughters will be sexually assaulted. In other words, safety concerns keep girls at home and we can see that the parents are being pragmatic about their concerns. A woman whom I interviewed told me:

"If I had only one son and one daughter, then I would send the son to school and keep the daughter with us at home because we love our daughter more and would not want her to go through all the hardships that she has to face in school and on the way. She would be much happier under the parent's care".

Talking to some more people also revealed that many of the residents of this village especially the women did not really consider education as an important issue in their lives. They were more concerned with their day-to-day work on the farm and looking after their properties. Some were also of the opinion that it would be useless to compete with the urban people who seemed more intelligent and some of the villagers I talked to seemed resigned to their beliefs that they are

better off doing farm work than loitering around in the city in search of work. The Bhutanese Government itself seems to indirectly reinforce such beliefs. A Bhutanese film titled '*Phazhing*' (2005) (ancestral land) produced by the Ministry of Agriculture shows a village school drop out's unsuccessful attempt to look for employment in the city and he later falls back on his farm as an educated farmer but with an edge over other farmers because of his education. With his qualification, he was able to pick up modern farming skills provided by the government and earn more farm income.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture (2005), the objective of the movie was to emphasize the importance of agricultural farming and discourage rural urban migration by highlighting the hardships in gaining employment and the disappointments and disillusionments faced by the main character in the movie. However, the government's attempt to highlight the disadvantages of rural urban migration also sends the messages that education is not so important if one has land to fall back upon. The message is even stronger for women who traditionally depend on men to learn the use of modern farm equipment. As a result, women find more comfort in farm work and see no use in pursuing education just to learn the use of modern farming machines, which can easily be handled by a male member in the household. The message may be intended to support the idea that education leads to successful farming but it does not portray women as beneficiaries as the machinery is handled by men in the film.

A survey conducted by the Ministry of Education illustrates other reasons for leaving schools. The table below shows the result of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education along with the Youth Development Fund organization. The survey shows the reasons for leaving schools by 241 students from 16 schools and the data was collected over a period of five years from 2000 to 2005 (Youth Development Fund and Ministry of Education, 2006: 50). The dropouts left school when they were in their first and second years of their High School levels.

Table 6: Reasons for leaving school, by gender in percentage

Reasons	Female	Male	Total
No reason	2.6	2.7	8.7
Economic	9.6	5.4	7.1
Employment	12.2	27.0	18.3
Family/Parent pressure	23.5	19.9	19.9
Ill health	16.5	10.8	12.9
Marriage	13.9	1.8	7.5
Misconduct	4.3	17.1	10.0
Pregnancy	14.8	0.9	7.5
Miscellaneous	2.6	15.3	8.3
Total	100	100	100

Source: Youth Development Fund and Ministry of Education (2005-2006:50).

Family pressure, ill health, pregnancies and marriage were important factors for girls leaving their schools whereas for boys, employment, family pressure and misconduct were reasons that are more important. As seen from the table, employment was a smaller reason for girls to leave school compared to boys. This could be because of the matrilineal system in central and western parts of Bhutan which allows girls to fall back on their inherited properties and their future was more or less assured even without education. Another report by Lham Dorji²⁶ (2005) found that people living on subsistence farming depended on their young children to help with household chores such as baby-sitting, dishwashing and running errands etc. In the traditional context, these were not worthy of adult involvement. Some of the students who participated in Lham Dorji's research had painful stories to narrate:

"I once studied in a village school. Those were the days when I had difficult times trying to balance work and studies. I was inspired by the poor family situation to work hard, but a routinely (sic) task at home disturbed my studies. I had to often, misinform my teachers deliberately and make excuses to bunk the class and other school activities so that I could attend to the household activities. I grew tired of

²⁶ Researcher at the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, Bhutan. The research was carried out in 12 districts covering a minimum of two schools in each district. 942 students and dropouts were surveyed.

household work that I even decided to discontinue my studies had not my sister took me to Thimphu to study. I am happy that I can focus more on my studies now” (Excerpt from Lham Dorji’s interview with a student, 2005:16).

Child labour and low income were found to be some of the determinants of children dropping out in terms of direct schooling cost and the indirect cost of losing children who contribute to the economy and hence, some parents chose not to educate their children, or students were forced to drop out. Some students were found to be leaving schooling halfway in order to avoid stiffer job seeking competition in future. Students returning from urban areas after their unsuccessful attempt at an urban career took back negative influences and discouraged other students from studying in the village. Single parenthood was also blamed for causing dropouts as one parent either could not afford schooling costs and some youth suffered ill-treatment at the hand of their stepparents. One student had this story to narrate:

“I study in class VIII and come from a poor single-parent family. Worst of all, my mother died and my father got married again forcing me to live with my distant cousin who is still providing me with my school expenses. Given his own economic circumstances, he often finds it difficult to provide me with what I would like him to. I have to attend the school with a worn-out school uniform and meagre pocket money which makes me feel inferior. If this continues, I would rather prefer to leave school and work” (Excerpt from Lham Dorji’s interview, 2005:16).

The table below is an outcome of Lham Dorji’s research on the causes of dropouts and shows that in some areas, distance to school is less important.

Table 7: Dropout Reasons

Reasons for not attending school	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Parents could not afford schooling expenses	19	25	44	33
I was needed at home	17	25	42	31
Parents did not think education worthwhile	7	19	26	19
I refused to go	2	6	8	6
Personal health problems	3	3	6	4
Problems getting schools	2	2	4	3
School far away	1	3	4	3
Grand Total	51	83	134	100

Source: Dorji, Centre for Bhutan Studies, (2005).

The villagers also lack exposure in terms of what education is able to help them achieve. This could be because of few women role models in the higher levels of government services and some village women's unsuccessful attempts to find employment in the city. Many of the village women who migrate to the city find employment as domestic helpers (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007) and the media often report on sexual and physical abuse of domestic helpers by their employers. Another reason is also lack of access to educational information. Few villagers are able to afford television sets and radios and because many of them are uneducated, they cannot read printed information. Lack of basic facilities hampered enrolment numbers. According to Ruby Noble's²⁷ research study on child friendly schools and quality education in Bhutan, about 54 percent of Bhutanese schools did not have access to a water supply and 49 percent did not have access to roads (Palden, Kuenselonline, 11th December 2008).

Another structural problem faced by the students was the lack of space for students to study. In recent times in Bhutan, the demand for schools exceeded the supply by the Government and as a result, an attractive market has been created for a number of private schools that cater from the nursery level to the higher secondary level. The Government itself is facing a crunch in the number of students in classrooms and the media has carried reports of overcrowded classrooms with the teachers being unable to pay proper attention to students, thus affecting the quality of education. This is evident from the media reports on the overcrowded classroom dilemma. Here is what one teacher had to say about her constant struggle to maintain order in an overcrowded classroom of 50 students in the national newspaper:

"My students don't get enough attention and there's hardly time and space for me to use any of the innovative teaching methods, such as group work or cooperative learning," (Choden, Kuenselonline, 22nd October 2008).

Education and employment are interrelated. Better education leads to possibilities of finding better jobs. Research has revealed that educated women are more likely to work outside their homes, enjoy their work and advance into better opportunities. For example, in research conducted by Naila Kabeer in Bangladesh about the level of women's education and their jobs, Kabeer found that illiterate and primary level educated women worked as domestic servants and

²⁷ Ruby Noble, an education specialist at UNICEF, was one of the 21 presenters at a three-day seminar organised by centre for educational research and development (CERD) and Paro College of education, Bhutan.

in garment factories (Kabeer, 2000:78). Therefore, the next section will discuss the relation between education and employment in Bhutan, especially for women.

Education and Employment

Because modernization started late in Bhutan, Bhutanese women were not affected by the economic globalization as in other developing countries²⁸. For that matter, even for Bhutanese men, working in the modern sector was a new experience. However, after economic development started progressing at a rapid pace there has been increased employment for both men and women in the public sector but as in other countries, the rate for employment for women has remained drastically low as will be seen in later discussion in this section.

Until modern development started in the 1960s, employment in the government service was characterised by immense hardships due to lack of communication infrastructure. Being in service meant days of walking to reach the place of work and being absent from home for months and years. An 80-year-old male villager who worked as an attendant for the second king in the 1940s had this to say:

“Most of the time I worked as a messenger. I had to walk for days to deliver a single message. These days it would have been a matter of a phone call. I hardly saw my family back at home. Even meal times were strict. All the attendants had to eat in a room outside the main chamber where our king lived. We were not summoned by names but by uttering a noise (that sounded similar to a burping noise) that we had to recognise as a command. Anyone one of us who attended the summons halfway through his meal would find his remaining meal emptied by our friends. We had to learn to eat real fast to keep ourselves full”.

Such hardship-filled situations changed with the introduction of modern education, better communication links and transportation facilities and the need for skilled human resources grew. Thus, it was not surprising that the pioneer students, limited in numbers were almost exclusively male and these males filled any important government positions available including those of administrators. With the introduction of modern infrastructure, it has become possible for women to participate in the nation's workforce. 23% of the civil service in 2006 were reported to be

²⁸ For example, in the 1980s, when modernization took over, the Senegal government in Africa was thrown into chaos after the government made inappropriate moves to liberalise the agriculture sector and reduced government subsidies. This led to a weak fluctuating exchange rate and in turn the quality of people's lives deteriorated with unemployment and low social investments (Dem, 1991:15-16). Because women were more likely to be at the bottom of the employment ladder, they were more likely to be affected (Witcherich, 2000).

women even though most of them are employed in the lower grades (Bhutan Report to CEDAW Committee, 2004:46).

The table below gives us an idea of number of women employed in the public service.

Table 8: Percentage of women employed in the public sector

As of 31st December 2007	No. women	Percentage
Total Civil Service Strength	18,807	100.00
Total female Civil Service Strength	5,499	29.24
Total Male Civil Service Strength	13,308	70.76
As of 30th June 2008		
Total Civil Service Strength	19,516	100.00
Total Female Civil Service Strength	5,763	29.53
Total Male Civil Service Strength	13,753	70.47

Source: Royal Civil Service Commission of Bhutan (2008).

Women's low level of participation is mentioned in both the Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee (2006) and the Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB Report (2007). Women's participation is reported to be especially lower in the modern sector, which comprises industry and the civil sectors. Even the situation of women's low participation in the public sector is attributed to the late start of modern education in Bhutan, but the NCWC report does admit that this is not the only reason. The employment sector in the urban centres usually considered women as '*unemployable*' because of their low level of education and skills. The highest rate of the labour population is in the agricultural sector, for example, a 1984 survey found that 95% women aged over 16-64 were found in the agricultural sector and 3.6% were found to have no occupation.

In 2005, the Population and Census Report showed that 97.4% of the rural population of women were engaged in the agricultural sector. Women fared a little better in the informal sector of employment. 2.1% of the rural women are reported to be unemployed whereas 2.9% of the rural men are unemployed. However, the reverse is true for the urban sector. 7.6% of the urban women are unemployed compared to 3.6% of men (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the

Census Commissioner 2005: 300). This figure confirmed the lower level of women's participation in the '*modern sector*'.

Table 9: Labour participation in work force (% of total population labour force)

Year	2003	2004	2006
Total Labour force	40.5	37.4	42.8
Male	46.0	45.6	47.7
Female	35.2	29.8	37.7
Unemployment rate	1.8	2.5	3.2
Rural	1.5	2.6	2.5
Urban	2.9	2.0	4.9
Labour force participation rate	62.9	54.4	61.8

Source: RGOB and NSB (2007).

Causes of the low level of women's employment

The Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee (2004) showed the national unemployment rate to be 3.1% and the average unemployed men as 3.3%, whereas unemployed women are reported to be 2.9%. This could be because the majority of those who have enough land holdings to look after did not find the need to look for alternative employment as was evident from my interview where rural people talked about the need for education for women not as a skill to gain employment but to be literate.

Social inequality, a low level of education and the role of being homemakers have prevented women all over the world from participating actively in public life thus lowering the level of employment opportunities for women. Social inequalities such as women's lack of ownership of land, the inability to take decisions on their own and denying access have all been contributing factors in denying gainful employment to women. Women's reproductive and productive roles as discussed earlier have further aggravated the situation for women in general. However, with the help of feminist movements and the efforts on the part of international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations, the plight of women has improved in recent times with even men advocating women's equality in all spheres of life. The well-known male economist Amartya Sen (2001) has in his essay '*Many faces of gender equality*' illustrated gender

inequality not as one homogenous phenomenon but as a collection of disparate and interlinked problems. In Bhutan development started in the late 1960s and the government soon after started advocating for women's equal right to participate in all development processes. However, as we have seen in the figures above, women lag far behind in their participation in the country's labour force, in the decision making level and even in literacy rates. I will examine some of the existing causes for women's low level of participation in the employment sector.

Access to training and technology

Even with the majority of women working in the agricultural sector, the Bhutan Report to CEDAW reported an indication of women's lesser access to participation in agricultural and animal husbandry training programmes (Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2004:44). Such restrictions on women lead to increased unskilled labour and women are denied access to developing their skills either directly through denial of schooling facilities or through providing gender-neutral training where men mostly benefit. The reason for bypassing training for women is attributed to travel outside the community and overnight stays. Traditional practices such as the matrilineal system of inheritance and caring for parents in their old age have been influential factors in denying education to women, thus depriving women of acquiring the necessary skills to participate in the skilled work force (Bhutan Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2004:45). The social practice of letting men handle all machinery is also a contributing factor for women not to take part in training.

Matrilineal System and Care Giving Practice

In the western and central regions of Bhutan where the matrilineal system of inheritance is followed, it comes at a price i.e. to take care of parents in their old age along with the inheritance. As a result of such practices, not only are women confined to their households for life and denied access to education but the traditional practices of being a mother and a care giver at the same time allow women almost no free time to pursue personal interests or engage in other side income generating activities. Some relief has come from the government in the form of NFE (Non-formal Education). This programme offers an opportunity for the people who have not been able to attend schooling when they were young and from 6 participants in 1992 when it first started, the number has increased to 14 694 participants in 2007 (Policy and Planning

Division, Ministry of Education, 2006:36). The NCWC Report clarified the tie between the matrilineal system and access to opportunities in this way:

“women’s traditional tie to the land in Bhutan, reinforced through matrilineal inheritance patterns especially in western and central areas, also has increased their responsibility in caring for their parents, hence limiting their social and economic choices” (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:32).

The report indicates that this situation benefits women more than the situation in the southern region of Bhutan where social interactions are limited by the patriarchal system enforced through the Hindu culture and religion.

Dependency

The dependency rate reported in the Population and Census Report (2005) is 60.6% including children and old people. For every hundred people, there are 60.6 dependants and since almost 49% of the population are women, the burden of looking after the majority of 60.6% of the dependants falls on women (Royal government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005:303).

Cultural Stereotypes

The perceptions that women are physically weaker and sexually more vulnerable have influenced women’s access to employment. These beliefs influence women’s ability to make public decisions and hence explain the existing low levels of women in important positions. An outcome of my interview on why people thought education was important for women in Bhutan can explain some of the reasons for the low levels of women in the employment sector. While some of the urban people thought that women needed education to empower themselves by getting stable jobs in life, many of them still thought the main objective of educating women is to be able to have an educated family. This confirmed the fact that, in spite of rapid development, men still have hardly changed their perceptions of women.

Fertility and Childcare

The burden of childcare takes a lot of women’s time thus leaving them with much less time to think of plans outside their household work. In spite of women working longer hours than men, some women did not feel that they were at a disadvantage because they felt men did work that

were that had more worth than women's work. As some women participants in my interview remarked:

"Women take complete care of children. In cases of labour shortage, men do baby sit sometimes. That will be usually older men who are not strong enough to work in the fields or children".

Another woman said that she even has difficulty finding time to eat:

"Women take care of the children. Children and parents sleep together, so even at night; our body will be half-wet with children's pee. Even during meal times, mums get to eat only after feeding every other member of the family".

Even men did acknowledge that women spend more time in childcare and yet they do very little to help their women. An influential man in the village observed that men took little interest in their children. He said:

"Women do seventy-five percent of childcare work. Even though these days more and more men are helping their women, the father starts taking a real interest only when the child is about 4 or 5 years old. Men act as if they are not the father of the children leaving all work for women. The women of the house have so much extra work to do after a hard day's work. For e.g. in summer, after a day's transplantation work, women have to sow vegetable seeds, water them, weed them and finally take the products for sale in addition to their domestic work. Men do only the digging part in the initial stage. Even around seventy-five percent of household work is done by women and men get enough time to roam and loaf around".

It can be concluded that if women had better help with childcare from their husbands, they would have more time to relax and plan other things besides their daily household and farm work. Here, it is also evident that the more children a family had, the less time available to devote to other income-generating activities. Thus, the fertility of women played a role in denying women access to employment opportunities other than farm and household work.

Sexual Harassment at work places

Another problem women faced in the employment sector was that of sexual harassment. The Bhutan Report to CEDAW (2004) claims that '*....Nor is there an underlying sexual tension or threat in public encounters between genders*'. I would argue that statement is far from the truth and sexual tensions do exist especially in the employment sector. Since men occupy most of important positions, women have to face men during job interviews and work under men. There are instances where men ask women for sexual favours either for a job position or promotions.

One of the interview participants who worked for an international organization in Bhutan said that for women to rise in positions, some women have to pay back with sexual favours.

Absence of role models

When the third King of Bhutan put the first development policies into place in the 1960s, many of the princesses were appointed as head of departments. Apart from the princesses, no women had ever reached the position of a Minister. A.C. Sinha discusses women Ministers during the third king's rule in the 1960s:

“The royal kinsmen such as his uncle, sister, and causin (sic) are assigned definite roles as the royal representatives in various departments of the government. Though in terms of protocol, they occupy the rank of ministers, they are not accountable in the same way as the ministers for their function” (Sinha, 1991:212).

However, the new democratic government (2008) now has four women as members of parliament and six women as national council members.

Summary

Education is universally acknowledged to develop a country's human resources. Education benefits both individually and for national development and helps expand opportunities for boys and girls worldwide. Providing universal education is one of the main goals of the Bhutan Government's development policy, which is implemented in line with the Gross National Happiness concept. Through plans and policies, the government emphasizes the importance of gender equality and closing the gap between boys and girls. However, such aspirations of the Government will not be achieved if drastic steps are not taken to improve the structural facilities of schooling such as proper transport, good roads, schools near to villages and an increase in the number of schools to avoid overcrowding. The Government also needs to identify the degree of educational disadvantage for girls, thrash out gender related obstacles and implement alternatives and remedies. Girls will not be inspired if women are represented in a demeaning way in course books, which questions the very purpose of education. Instead, there is a need for the Government to include role models that girls can look up to and aspire to be successful in life rather than reinforce the traditional way of confining women within households. The

Government should examine school curricula that portray women in a subordinate way and replace them with courses that encourage and build confidence for women.

Another step that the Government needs to take is to identify whoever makes the decisions to educate children. For this Kabeer's suggestion of '*unpacking organization*' comes in useful. Kabeer argues that it is important to identify the power that determines priorities and makes the rules. Kabeer writes:

"The unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities within an organization, together with the official and unofficial rules which legitimize this distribution tend to ensure that some institutional actors have the authority to interpret institutional goals and needs as well as ability to mobilize the loyalty, labour or compliance of others" (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996:20).

This is true especially for rural Bhutan where the traditional norms dictate who should be sent to schools. Parents stick to the existing practices of depending on their daughters to take care of them and their property in their old age, so that as a result there are low levels of female enrolments in school, and more alarmingly a higher rate of dropout for girls. The local governments can plan to increase the number of schools in their community to educate more children, but it is ultimately in the hands of the central government to finance such programmes. If gender disparity in education is to be improved, then the Government should provide support for local governments' decisions to expand schooling institutions as well as take tactful steps that can influence the decision of the parents so that there is less resistance. Kabeer explains it better as follows:

"those whose interests are best served by the prevailing configuration of the rules and resources are not only most likely to resist, but also have the greatest capacity to resist, any attempt at redistribution or transformation" (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996:21).

The issues of education and employment are interlinked and factors affecting one issue affect both education and employment. Highly skilled people and non-skilled people face different risks in employment. The skilled may often change jobs or create self-employment whereas the later are at greater risk of losing their jobs or facing longer periods of unemployment. Many Bhutanese women fall under the latter group of unskilled labour thus increasing the need for the Government to do more. Any steps taken by the Government to improve education for women will automatically lead to improvement in women's employment rates in both the public and

private sector. As discussed above, education helps decrease women's fertility rate, alleviate poverty, provide better time management and makes them more knowledgeable about expanding opportunities in lives. However, other issues stretch beyond education and cause women to shy away from seeking employment. Issues such as sexual harassments, cultural influences and traditional practices in which women are seen as not capable of handling technology, and perceptions that women belong within the household to provide care-giving facilities play important roles in confining women into the households.

One of the most important goals of the Bhutan Government is to provide gender equality and increase the happiness and general wellbeing of the whole population. The wide gender gaps in the employment sector and higher levels of education illustrate the Government's need to do more to change the general perceptions that shape Bhutanese women's futures. Educating the population on the importance of women's role in the development process, information through the media about the negative affects of some of the traditional practices and highlighting the importance of education for women would go a long way in alleviating the existing gender gaps. This information needs to be spread more in the rural areas where 69% of the population live (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005). National happiness will not be achieved if women who comprise almost half the Bhutanese population are left out of development programmes.

4. CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER IN BHUTAN

Introduction

The contrasting relationship between culture and modernization has been investigated by Thierry Verhelst, a senior Project Officer of the Belgian Development Agency, who argued that local culture can act as a powerful resisting force to unwanted effects of modernisation. This feeling has been echoed by the Bhutanese government where the concept of Gross National Happiness uses preservation of culture as a way of protecting its identity and maintaining independence from western influences. With the emphasis on cultural preservation this chapter will be primarily concerned with examining the relationship between gender, culture and modernisation in Bhutan. Because the Bhutanese development approach is different from that of the western model of development, the '*Happiness*' concept of GNH will be discussed in relation to gender equality and culture. Informed by feminist analysis, the chapter takes a critical look at how women negotiate their self enhancement/happiness between tradition and social change. In order to analyse how Bhutan sees the impact of existing traditional practises on women, I draw on official reports, such as the documents submitted to the CEDAW Committee by the Bhutan government and National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), followed by the country's legislations of Citizenship Act, Marriage Act and Inheritance Act. I also draw on my own research findings based on participant observations and interviews (for more detail, see chapter 1, method section).

In '*No Life without Roots*' (1990), Verhelst has argued that western ideas of development in third world countries often promote poverty by imposing western values and modern technology, forcing people to shift their values from subsistence living to dependency on economic growth. As a result, the very way of life of subsistence farming becomes replaced through destroying the local environment and increasing dependency on outside aid. In contrast, the Bhutan government is trying to use sustainability of its culture as a way of remaining self-sufficient. The idea of cultural preservation is further discussed by Stefan Priesner (1996) and Akiko Ueda (2003) who maintained that the Bhutan government strengthened their GNH concept by rejecting development programmes that came with conditions that did not suit the government's policies.

It must be noted that culture not only plays a critical role in shaping gender roles but also in disempowering or discriminating against women. It may interact with policies to achieve a sense of well-being and happiness in ways that do not further women's interests. In the light of this, it is imperative that the state should take responsibility for segregating positive and negative aspects of culture that discriminate against women in order to ensure gender equality and a fair level of human development. This argument is supported by Naila Kabeer (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996) where she argued that gender roles are constructed by culture and in order to understand the very nature of gender roles, culture must be examined if there is to be any development policies that ensure gender equality. This argument is further strengthened by Boserup (1979) where she blamed traditional practices of women's dependence on men as a culprit for aggravating women's plight. Therefore, it has become important to explore traditional practices and beliefs in the context of Bhutanese society in order to understand women's position and the way culture impacts on them.

Another important role performed by women in preserving culture is through transferring knowledge to younger generations. This is because women tend to spend more time with children in their nurturing role. As Yuval-Davis (1989) has effectively argued, women's role as culture bearers is critical in maintaining the ethnic or cultural boundary of a community. Paradoxically, while women are seen as a symbol of nationalism they are not equally represented in the symbolic culture of nationalism. For example, women's sexual behaviours are monitored to distinguish one ethnic group from another (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989:10). Yet, in seeking to preserve its unique history and cultural homogeneity, Bhutan's national identity can be claimed to be sidelining the unequal differential position of women. How different is Bhutan's culture to other cultures and how women are treated and positioned within traditional practices will be explored.

Culture and development

Culture is often defined as practices and beliefs of society linked to tradition and religion. Accordingly, culture is to be understood as the foundation of every society where it shapes our understanding of how things are done and why they are done.

The World Conference on Cultural Policies describes culture as:

“....the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs;” (UNESCO²⁹, 1982)

In addition to the distinctiveness of culture, the “*concept of identity, language, lifeworld*” remain critical in the preservation of culture (Kompridis, 2005:318-319). Indeed, the claim for cultural preservation is presented as integral to Bhutan’s claim of national identity.

From another angle, culture and development are said to be intertwined and difficult to segregate as each penetrates the lives of the indigenous population. As and Verhelst and Tyndale (2002) argued, culture is a part of development because it pervades the very essence of local conception of a ‘*good life*’. If meaningful development is to take place, culture should be embedded into development programmes (Verhelst and Tyndale, 2002). In other words, culture, not only belongs to the past but also evolves in response to outside influences as well as internal forces of change. As Verhelst and Tyndale put it:

“the complex whole of knowledge, wisdom, values, attitudes, customs and multiple resources which a community has inherited, adopted or created in order to flourish in the context of its social and natural environment” (Verhelst and Tyndale, 2002:10).

In the context of Bhutan GNH concept the attempt to negotiate and integrate development initiatives with culture is premised on the notion of cultural preservation.

Kabeer (1994) and Moser (1993) add that culture is never neutral as it shapes gender relations and tends to be gender biased. In most societies, there are appropriate expectations and behaviours that men and women are required to follow which tend to reflect a general pattern of division of labour: ‘*men’s work*’ and ‘*women’s work*’. While explanations may vary from society to society, the general pattern is that women end up with less personal autonomy, and with limited access to resources and decision-making influences within the household and in the wider community (Schaikwyk et al. 2007:1).

²⁹ World Conference on Cultural Policies held in Mexico City from 26th July to August 6th, 1982.

To what extent do Bhutanese development policies empower women?

At a glance, the Gross national Happiness concept of development seems to take the approach of gender neutrality. It is only when the pillars of GNH are closely examined that the issue of gender inequality arises. Since socio-economic development and cultural preservation are two of the founding principles of GNH, the position of Bhutanese women can be examined in terms of Bhutan's development policies and cultural practices that shape women's lives. The GNH concept can be understood more as a term to identify Bhutan's development policies as unique from that of a western approach of development but it does not in itself adequately address the inclusion of women into development process while at the same time safeguarding the preservation of culture.

Not long after Bhutan started its development policies, it recognised women as an important part of human resources in the economic development processes. This is thanks to Ester Boserup's (1970) pioneering work in documenting the work burden borne by women by highlighting the long hours, tedious and heavy nature of women's work and the negative effect it had on their health and well-being (Boserup's views on the role of women in economic development are discussed in chapter two). These hardships are outlined in international human development reports and that has resulted in placing women in development frameworks. Since it has become a member of international organizations, Bhutan naturally has had to follow international principles on ensuring that gender equity is maintained in all its policies. These gender development policies are carried out in the form of legal reforms, health policies and economic plans.

The important question that arises here is '*what is the objective of Bhutanese development plans for women*' and '*how are women to negotiate change between development and culture towards achieving gender equality*'? An overview of the Bhutanese five-year development plans has already been discussed in chapter two. Here I will discuss in brief the government's main objective of including women in the development programmes. In all the development plans, the principle of equal opportunity for women in the education sector is emphasized. Education changes people's perception towards cultural beliefs and increases capacity for women to deal

with the outside world. As Kabeer (2005) argued that women's exposure to new ideas translates collective action against male privileges. For example, the anti-liquor movement by women in India (2002) was sparked by women being members of a literacy programme. However, Kabeer (2005) also argued that not everything about education is empowering. In societies where women's reproductive role is seen as paramount, education is used to equip women to be better housewives and mothers or to gain better husbands; in this instance, education does little to help women and girls to question their subordinate status (Kabeer, 2005:17). In Bhutanese societies most educated women aim to be employed and work rather than being stay at home as mothers. Many women talk about education as a way of empowering them both economically and culturally and this is reflected in some of the interview feedback:

"I do feel women should have education because they can then work in office like men and avoid hard physically demanding work" (55-year-old woman).

"I think it is very important to educate women because we have seen that women are equally adaptable to new technologies and are very knowledgeable refuting our thoughts that women are dumb. I am uneducated and do not know anything else besides household work" (50 year-old woman).

According to the sixth five-year plan (1987-1992), the purpose of including women in to the development plans is explained as:

"Bhutan's full human potential, as well as ensuring that the whole population benefits from development, requires special efforts to involve women in development".

The steps taken in this plan were to integrate women into development goals but actual actions were limited to health, education and reproductive functions. This bears traces of the earliest attempts (1950-1970) to improve women's welfare through top-down handouts to meet women's practical needs such as food aid, measures against malnutrition and family planning programmes known as the '*Welfare Approach*'. The welfare approach saw emphasis on women in their reproductive roles and thus seen as passive beneficiaries of development (Candida et al. 1999:59). In order to reduce women's poverty, the Bhutan government had introduced several income generating activities under National Women's Association of Bhutan discussed in chapter two.

The seventh five year plan (1992-1997) provided an extra provision to involve women into development through income generating work by providing training in activities such as

weaving, agro-based industries and food processing. As a measure to improve women's well-being that is used here, the emphasis was placed on poverty as the problem for women's under development and not the problem of subordination. This approach encouraged involving women in small-scale industries and income generating activities (Candida et al. 1999:60).

The eighth plan (1997-2002) identified women's involvement in development as a '*measure related to the promotion of women in development*' emphasizing that policies will look into '*women's special needs, role and potential*'. This strategy seems to have changed to the '*Efficiency Approach*' of the 1980s where women's economic contributions are recognised by acknowledging their triple role, reproductive, productive and community role and meeting women's practical needs.

Can culture be neutral in development?

Any type of development initiative brings in changes. In other words, development is all about change. Development initiatives of the Bhutan government promote social and economic changes and in some cases even encourage changes of values and social relations. For example, initiatives such as roads may allow greater mobility for a community and will allow more access to health services, goods and education. At the same time, they could lead to increase in migration leading to households where men are absent (or women are absent) depending on regional migration patterns. Thus, culture can never remain constant, it continually changes affecting social behaviour, attitudes, values which in turn reshape people's lives.

Naila Kabeer debated the negative elements of culture that subjugate women. Kabeer (2005) argued that influential aspects of tradition and culture are so taken for granted that they become normalised. As a result, women sometimes internalise their subordinate status and view themselves as inferior to men, then their sense of rights and entitlements are diminished (Kabeer, 2002:46). For example, women may submit to violence against them and make choices that will further enhance their subordinate positions. Another area of culture where women are marginalised is in women's role as cultural preservers. According to Yuval-Davis³⁰ and Floya

³⁰ Professor Yuval-Davis is an elected member of the Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences and has been a founder member of the international research network on women in militarized conflict zones. She has been an expert consultant to, among others, UNDP, Amnesty International and the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

Anthias³¹ (1989), women bear the responsibility of preserving culture through controlled reproduction within an ethnic society thus reproducing national boundaries. Women are seen to be responsible for nurturing the spiritual quality of the national culture (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989:6-7). However, this responsibility does not necessarily elevate the position of women in society. Rather, this '*burden of representation*' of collective identity and future destiny often legitimizes the control and oppression of women, constructs them as passive bearers of a nation's honour rather than as subjects with an agency of their own (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1997:45-47).

The notion that culture works against women is strongly supported by Gita Sen³² and Caren Grown³³ in '*Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era*' (DAWN) (1985). They argued that social forces such as national chauvinism, racism and sexism subdue the most oppressed sections of society and then dissipate their ability to resist any policies that are not in their interests (Sen and Grown, 1985:67). Even in the political arena, cultural practices discriminate against women.

Historically, men who have enjoyed the position as the bread earner and the head of a family want to carry forward the same position in the public domain. Men have always dominated the political power while women have carried on the age-old practices of looking after the household as wives and mothers. As Stacy³⁴ and Price argued, all women shared communality about housework and family attachment and:

"each woman was attached to a family and the material bases of their families in the public world derived from the class position in the world of the husband-father; women were divided by their allegiance to their separate family interests as defined by their husbands" (Stacy and Pricey, 1981:86).

Such allegiances and their subordinate positions in society prevented women from venturing out into the public and assume power. Stacy and Price thus concluded that traditional practices of men have at least partly unconsciously restricted the activity of women. These restrictions were

³¹ Floya Anthias is a Sociologist and co-wrote many books on women with Yuval-Davis.

³² Dr. Gita Sen is a pioneer in the field of gender and development. Dr. Gita Sen is also an NGO activist. She is a professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, India

³³ Caren Grown is the Director for Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth at the International Center for Research on Women in Washington, DC

³⁴ Margaret Stacy was a Sociologist and a Feminist who later became a Professor in the University of Wales, then known as Swansea.

carried out in the interest of men, as husbands and fathers, employers, administrators and as politicians to keep women in their traditional place while making use of women's productive and reproductive roles, for entry of women into public domain would mean alteration in the entire life style of men (Stacy and Price, 1981:179). This argument is clearly reflected in Bhutanese women's representation in the decision-making position at the national level. For example, in 2006, only three percent of the National Assembly members were women and representation in district level meetings are sometimes as high as seventy percent (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:18, 23).

Women and Culture

What makes culture important to people? The answer can be found in Yuval-Davis's description of 'human security'. Human security reflects the:

"growing move of security concerns from inter-state to intra-state concerns and from national territories to ethnocized and racialized communities, local and trans-national"(Yuval-Davis, 2006, downloaded 7th September 2007).

and these concerns are partly pushed by:

"growing participation of NGOs and the growing sophistication of Peace and Conflict Studies. It also reflected the growing unease not only with the spread of ethnic conflicts and wars but also with the growing poverty and inequity under neo-liberal globalised market" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, downloaded 7th September 2007).

Human security concerns not only protection from diseases, poverty and warfare but it also concerns the ability to maintain independence from outside influences through globalization and cultural homogenization and to be able to nurture one's own culture that can be passed to younger generations.

Christa Wichterich (2000) in 'The Globalized Woman' very effectively argues this kind of marginalisation. Wichterich argued that corrupt authoritarian regimes often back increased profit with low pay and no secondary wages and women fall victim to such corrupt practices. Why is women's cheap labour the means to launch into the world market? Wichterich answers it convincingly. The answer is found in the culture that treats women as employable part time, casual, they can be dismissed easily, they can be paid starvation money and the persistent belief

that women work to supplement their husband's income. Women's roles as mothers and wives diminish their interest in long time employment (Wichterich, 2000:1-2).

Gender and Empowerment

There are different yet interrelated types of empowerment namely economic and cultural empowerment. There are widespread cultural and economic practices that hamper empowerment. To assess both opportunities and obstacles, empowerment must be examined in terms of intersections of political, social, cultural and environmental conditions along with economic indicators. Women are economically empowered when they have access to resources such as land, micro-credit scheme, information, participation in decision-making and freedom of mobility. Cultural empowerment is said to be influenced by cultural practices, traditions and religious interpretation of gender equality (Kabeer, 2000, Boserup, 1979)

Sociologist Naila Kabeer (2000) defines women's empowerment as the process by which women have the ability to make "strategic life choices". This ability needs three inter-related dimensions: resources, which include access to and future claims to both material and social resources; agency, which includes the process of decision-making and negotiation, and achievements that are the well-being outcomes. In short, empowerment is:

"the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore implies to be denied choice" (Kabeer, 2005:13)

Even though Kabeer had included '*achievement*' as an additional component of women's empowerment, it could be argued that achievements could be treated as an outcome of empowerment since '*achievements*' are made as a result of processes such as legal reforms, political participations and economic transformations.

In Bhutan, it can be said that women have access to resources since they inherit property ownership and manage most of the family income. Women also have the right to make decisions even though some major decisions may be made in consultation with their husbands. Not only that, it will be seen that Bhutanese women also have more access to financial resources in addition to their own earnings, as they manage earnings of other family members within the household. All these issues are discussed shortly below. This is in contrast to many developing countries where women even do not have the right to be consulted. The government's effort to

empower women can be seen in its ninth five-year plan (2002-2007) where it promoted government's continued support for women's wider representation and participation in decision-making bodies as well as in the labour market in both public and private. This policy seems to support the 'Empowerment Approach', the most recent approach where women's subordination is seen as a result of male oppression and it openly acknowledged the 'centrality of power, asserting that women have to get more out of it (power) to change their position' (Candida et al, 1999: 60):

Janet Henshall Momsen (2004) explains empowerment of women in terms of gender equality:

"Gender equality does not necessarily mean equal numbers of men and women or girls or boys in all activities, nor does it mean treating them in the same way. It means equality of opportunity and a society in which women and men are able to lead equally fulfilling lives. The aim of gender equality recognizes that men and women often have different needs and priorities, face different constraints and have different aspirations. Above all, the absence of gender equality means a huge loss of human potential and has costs for both men and women and also for development" (Momsen³⁵, 2004:8)

As seen from the definitions above, empowerment exists only when women have the freedom to make their own choices in life. Thus, it can be concluded that culture shapes the extent of empowerment for women through freedom of mobility, right to decision-making and public participation. In Bhutan, in spite of having access to resources through the matrilineal system of inheritance, many traditional practices still favour men and women are disempowered in many ways. However, the fast pace of development within the country has allowed the Bhutanese government to pay more attention to women in the development process. These issues will become clear when we examine traditional practices in terms of issues such as decision-making, financial control and management at home, reproductive control over their bodies, inheritance and freedom of mobility.

Empowerment in Decision-making (Tangible nature of traditional practices)

Decision-making plays an important part in empowering women. Without the power to make decisions, women would not be able to make their own choices as discussed before.

³⁵ Momsen is a Professor of Geography at the University of California at Davis.

Do women have an equal say in the family?

Whereas in many developing countries, men had the right to make household decisions such as financial control, delegating tedious work to women or limiting family size (all the issues already discussed in chapter one) Bhutanese women seem to fare much better than those in other developing countries. For instance, The Bhutan Report to CEDAW (2004) reported that head of the household is not a gender-specific domain. The concept of household head is ambiguous. There is no fixed social responsibility to head households. Whoever is more capable is considered the head of the family. The Population and Census report (2005) reported 71.8 % households headed by men and 28.2% headed by women (Royal Government of Bhutan, Office of the Census Commissioner 2005:421). Women by virtue of working indoors are more decisive and influential in household decision-making activities. Women get to arrange work programmes. For example, women divide the day's work within the family members and they decide who should do what.

However, when it comes to attaching importance to jobs concerning local public space or community matters, men are mostly associated with the public sphere of life. For example, men attended important decision-making public meetings (such as the decision to build roads) that would influence the whole community. Men are always seen to be more capable and it is mostly the men who attend public meetings. Male dominance is evident here. For example, the choice of sending men to important decision-making meetings and men's dominance is explained by a 51 year old village woman whom I interviewed:

"I think men are given more respect when they venture outside the house because age old practices still prevail that men deserve more respect than women. Even if the man is less capable than woman, he still earns more respect. But in urban places, both men and women seem equally respected both within the household and outside .When there are important meetings in the village, the men are usually expected to attend rather than women. So I think there is still some discrimination in deciding who is more efficient and who has more authority".

An example of women's low representation in community and district decision-making bodies is seen in the figures presented in the table below and shows that women's level of participation in DYT's and GYT's where matters of national importance must be discussed:

Table 10: Women's representation in DYT and GYT (Rural Bhutan)

District	DYT*		Block	GYT*	
	Male	Female		Male	Female
Mongar	41	3	Shemjong	10	0
Tsirang	50	0	Jaray	23	0
Lhuentse	26	0	Shumar	3	2
Pemagatsel	21	2	Bumdiling	24	0
Trashiyangtse	24	0			

Note*: DYT means District Level Meeting (Dzongkha Yargye Tshogchung)

GYT means Community Level Meeting (Gewog Yargye Tsogchung)

Source: Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB (2007:48).

However, women mostly attend village meetings that are related to minor work such as hearing public messages, announcements or collecting contributions for community festivals while men attend more important ones. While women heads of households voice their opinions at these meetings through men this is not visible empowerment. The association of men with the public space and women with domestic and private affairs undermine women's contribution in the community. These practices reinforce patriarchal values and delegate women in the background. The Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB Report (2007:48) shows that most of the village meetings are represented by up to 70% of women.

Financial Control and Management

Bhutanese women also have greater financial control within the household. Women not only kept their own earnings but also took charge of earnings made by every member of household. This seemed to be a better longstanding tradition (Pain and Pema 2004: 421). A 90-year-old man's admission proves that this had been the case.

"When I was earning, I have handed over all the money I had to the woman of the house and they decide on how the money is to be spent. Now I don't have any money of my own and cannot buy my own drink even".

This practice is in existence at present. The fact is demonstrated by the interview feedback I had from my research. An 81-year-old woman spoke of how her daughter controls the household:

"The woman of the house, my daughter has greater control over household decision-making. Any decision taken by her over educating children is final and the father does not say anything".

Another 50 year old woman describes financial management in her house:

“The finance of the house is controlled by me. I keep the savings of every member of the family and decide as how it is to be spent”.

Even men admitted that they allowed their women to control financial affairs.

A 50-year-old man confirmed that women are given financial control of the house;

“Money is controlled by my wife and when it comes to investment which involves more money, then we sit together and discuss”.

The husband is responsible for bringing in provisions to feed the household and the woman is responsible for managing their utilization. An interesting point to note is that in families where the wife is totally dependent on the husband for income, the head of the household is understood to be the man to the public even though the wife still has control over the earnings of the husband.

Wages

In contrast to some developing countries, women in Bhutan seem to be paid not only equally for the same kind of work but also had greater control over their own earnings as well as earnings of other family members.

Earlier, the wages for men and women were different even for the same kind of work. The difference was because men were stronger and produced more output than women for the same kind of work. During labour exchanges, only men could repay a man's work and men were sent to repay women's work only if there was shortage of women at home. Ironically, young boys were paid at par with men even though their output could be less than that of a woman. The government has now fixed the same rate of payment for the same kind of work irrespective of gender both in the public and private sectors including at farm work. This policy is however, criticized by the Human Rights Committee of CEDAW (2004) which expressed its concerns over the policy that even though same rate of payment for same work is to be paid to both men and women, women are still biased through work opportunities.

The following remark seems to be targeted at the low level of women's participation in important positions in the government:

“The Committee is concerned about the lack of special policies and programmes to promote equal employment opportunities for women in the country. It is also concerned that the national labour legislation currently in preparation recognizes “equal pay for equal work” but not “equal pay for work of equal value”” (CEDAW Committee concluding report, 2004: sec.109).

A woman in the village expressed her confusion over the change in government rule:

“There is same pay and status between men and women now. Things have changed. I do not know if it is because of new government rules but I noticed that today a woman can be sent to do a man’s work and they are given equal value. Both men and women get equal opportunity to do any kind of manual farm work at the village levels. And there is no system of promotion in the village”.

She further adds her appreciation for the equal wage system:

“It is a good thing because now we do not have to look for men when we have to repay a man’s work. Girls are good enough”.

The woman is 81 years old and is at an age to resist changes. Nevertheless, she was of the opinion that the fixation of equal wages to both men and women was a positive trend towards a change for better gender equality. It should be noted that skilled workers are paid more and women workers are hardly skilled. Skilled work such as handling machineries, carpenters, masonry are dominated by men and women serve in the unskilled level of work where expertise are not needed.

Do women have control over their reproductive role?

In contrast to other regions where mostly women participate in family planning, Bhutan has a high rate of male participation. For example, Kabeer (1994) argues that men have put up a lot of major hurdles to dissemination of contraceptives through resistance to use of male contraceptives in the third world countries and that women should not be blamed for lack of motivation. This is because most family planners operate in a ‘*social vacuum*’ and they behave as though women are responsible for limiting family members (Kabeer, 1994:213).

A large number of men participated in family planning programme. This is obvious from the table below and shown in my interview feedback. This is an indication that women have some form of control over limiting family size. However, this trend is visible mostly in the rural areas where vasectomy is a matter of convenience. My research found that in the rural area, not only men agree that men should participate in family planning but almost all the husbands in a village

had actually undergone vasectomy themselves. Every household answered that men should take part in family planning because it is an easier procedure for them. Whereas for women, they have to take days of rest if they resort to tubectomy and as a result lose precious working days. They also heard stories of severe side effects brought on by other forms of contraceptives such as pills, IUDs and Injections and the women were scared to try it. As for condoms, most said they cannot make hygienic use of it and it is a nuisance and sometimes children were seen playing with used condoms causing family embarrassments. One of the reasons can be attributed to lack of proper toilet facilities at home. Rural people have toilets built some distance outside the home and water is shared from a common tap within the village. The majority of the houses do not have water supply at home and some houses that have connection use it for cooking purposes and not for bathroom purposes. Some men said, they underwent a vasectomy because they felt sorry for their women working hard all day and they took the burden on themselves. A woman however said that some men undergo vasectomy to control their wives' illegal affairs and it is an indirect way of controlling women against the threat of pregnancy. Some male respondents in my interview who had no children said that they would have taken part in family planning as they too thought it was a simple procedure for them.

Even though urban participants unanimously agreed that men should take equal responsibility in family planning, there is no gender-segregated data separately on rural and urban vasectomy participation. However, around 20 households in a village I interviewed, men from 19 households have undergone vasectomy and only one woman had undergone tubectomy. Thus, it would be fair to conclude that the majority of 44% for vasectomy in the table below would be from the rural areas. More and more educated people have started limiting their family members. This is because of the government's policy that a small family will have much better quality of life. In spite of Bhutan's small population, the government does not see it as important to increase its population. In contrast, the government's policy has always been to have a small, compact and efficient labour force in the country (Royal Civil Service Commission, 2008).

With mechanization, many of the traditional practices of farm work using extensive human labour are slowly being replaced. Thus, the trend now is to have a smaller family size. The use of contraception has been widely supported by the government even distributing free condoms

besides providing free medical facilities to reduce population growth. The table below shows the different methods of contraception used both in urban and rural areas in 2002.

Table 11: Methods of Contraception in 2002

Methods	Percentage
Vasectomy	44
Condoms	4
Tubectomy	10
Pills	11
IUD	11
Injection	19
Others	1

Source: Black and Stalker (2006:33).

Access to education

The issue of Bhutanese women's access to education and the number of women in lower and higher level of learning has already been discussed in detail in Chapter 3 under education.

Inheritance

Women's access to property is very important because it is linked to women's social status and vulnerability to poverty. It is also increasingly linked to other problems such as HIV, Aids, hunger and domestic violence. Many women in developing countries do not have access to property mainly because of the patriarchal nature of inheritance. Moser (1993) argued that even if women were the principal users of housing, ownership was denied to the women. Rather:

“tenure is generally given to the men as household heads, even where women de facto had primary household responsibilities” (Moser, 1993:52).

Even though the Inheritance Act of 1980 provides that every sibling in a family is entitled to an equal share of inheritance from their parents, the matrilineal system mostly rules a major part of Bhutan. The actual system of inheritance varies from region to region. Southern Bhutan follows a patriarchal system of inheritance where the daughters go out to live with the husbands and sons inherit everything. In the western region, generally the women inherit parental property whereas in some eastern regions daughters and sons inherited equally. All systems eventually balance out workforce and property share through marriage.

The social concession of women's right to inherit properties is protective of women's economic independence. Since most of the women are homemakers, their opportunities outside the household are limited and women need more social securities than men do. There is a provision in the legal act that ultimately it is in the hands of the parents to decide on how inheritance should be divided. Even though daughters may be entitled to inherit traditionally, parents have the right to hold back if the daughter has not been helpful for the parents and acted against the wishes of the parents. Sons and daughters who are either not married but not able to live under the same roof with other siblings owing to differences at home are entitled to a portion of the family property to be used until they die. However, they are not allowed to sell or mortgage it without the consent of the parents and eventually the property is returned back to the original house on the death of the temporary holder.

Pain³⁶ and Pema³⁷ in their study of land holdings in Bhutan found that the matrilineal inheritance system is culture specific and with little surplus income generation from the land, the arrangement kept women as keepers of the house and land in an inferior position. The early monastic institutions dominated by men enabled men to quickly move into formal positions and leave women at a disadvantaged position at home. They also argued that land was not the only significant asset which women could lay claim to but there are other forms of skills such as intricate traditional weaving which could help women gain social recognition and income (Pain and Pema, 2004:433-434). They seem to contradict themselves when the land is treated as both an asset and hurdle for women. As an asset, inheritance secured women's economic future but as a hurdle, it restricted women's mobility. Perhaps they acknowledge an ambivalent situation that does not warrant outright conflict and dissatisfaction. What is implied here is that women should not only find comfort in land ownership only but should venture into other income generating activities that ensured more mobility. However, even weaving requires months of long hours sitting and can be more restricting than farming.

³⁶ Adam Pain was a lecturer in Natural Resources in Development Studies, UK from 1976 – 1987. From 1992 to 2000 he worked as principle advisor to the Minister of Agriculture in Bhutan on research and extension policy and natural resource management.

³⁷ Deki Pema is a woman Planning Officer, Planning and Policy Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Bhutan

Freedom of Mobility

The general pattern of gender division of work at home and outside home defines women's mobility outside the house and into the wider community. Caroline Moser (1993) made a meaningful distinction between gender divisions of labour. She found that in most developing countries, as long as women worked for household needs such as collecting water, managing toilets and/or education men supported them. This kind of work restricted women's mobility and confined them in tedious repetitive jobs. As soon as women demanded equality as an end to gender discrimination, men withdrew their support. This is because granting equality would mean men losing control over women and their activities. Thus, fair division of labour granted a high degree of mobility for women.

The Bhutan Report to CEDAW (2004) states that there is no distinct division of roles in Bhutan between men and women and work is normally divided based on the traditional beliefs of physical strength. Work is normally divided into outdoor and indoor work. Outdoor work is related to activities that demand more physical strength such as ploughing, felling trees, carpentry, masonry etc. Few women could actually do such work. Women are identified more with indoor work such as household chores and others that require lesser degree of strength. Rural women in addition to their main economic activities often work to supplement their income through kitchen gardening and handicrafts. Thus, men and women's domains are seen to be blurred to some extent especially in the northern and western Bhutan. By virtue of men's physical strength and as family representatives men assumed public faces and are respected more for the kind of work they did and risks they took.

Although women were involved both in domestic work and farming, the men always took the more strenuous responsibilities and women were allocated less difficult jobs. For example, during rice transplantation, men took care of ploughing and levelling while women transplanted. At the same time, men were also involved in guarding their water source to their rice fields at night so that neighbours did not steal water from the irrigation channel. This kept men awake at night. Women did such work only if there were no men in the family but such a situation left women vulnerable to sexual attacks at night when they were out guarding their fields. Taking responsibility for such kind of work by men can be seen as men being protective about their

women, which is seen by people as a positive trend. It can be concluded that Bhutanese women have more freedom in mobility compared to women in other developing nations because of the nature of gender division of labour, such as sharing farm work, their control over finance (providing resource to move around), reproductive control (limiting family size so that women are not confined to being mothers most of their lives).

The above discussion on women's empowerment examined the tangible culture of Bhutan that can be said to empower women. The following section will now move on to the intangible nature of culture and beliefs that equally play a role in the positioning of women in society.

Intangible Nature of Culture that Disempowers women

Religious Beliefs

Inglehart and Norris maintain that religion has determined social norms and moral values with regard to gender equality in all societies, thus influencing support for feminism. For example, fundamentalist Christians and Islamist leaders in Muslim nations have often actively sought to reinforce social norms of a separate and subordinate role for women as mothers and homemakers and regulating legal frameworks for marriages, abortion, contraception and child care policies. Thus, the increasing power of gender equality could be only explained by the eroding power of religious beliefs and cultural practices with the growing secularisation of the modern world (Inglehart and Norris, 1990:50-51).

Inglehart and Norris also argue that cultural norms, values and beliefs also shape the transition to gender equality. These include how far economic growth serves women's needs and priorities and how far legal rights and development policies are implemented and translated into effective reforms. This human development process is likely to result in more egalitarian attitudes toward women in virtually any society, although this process, particularly the pace of cultural change, is mediated by the particular religious legacies, traditions and institutional structures in each country. Such trends can be accelerated through social movements, NGOs, impact of policy processes by governments and international networks of women who work with local and regional grassroots associations (Inglehart and Norris, 2003:149-150).

Buddhism is said to form an important part of Bhutanese culture (Ueda, 2003). Culture is more or less shaped by religious beliefs that are practised in daily lives and these practices have been handed down for generations. Traditionally, Buddhism in Bhutan has an important role in shaping a woman's future and the amount of freedom she is allowed to exercise both in public and private life. Nowhere is it written in the rules and law how women should behave and conduct themselves both in private and public life. However, there is an invisible rule ingrained in the form of religious beliefs that women are either forced to follow or motivated to follow as the proper form of their position in society³⁸. For example, a woman carrying an empty basket must avoid the path of a man on an important mission lest she should bring bad luck upon him.

One example of women's subordinate portrayal can be seen in school reading books, which reproduce religious beliefs in school textbooks. Women are depicted in pathetic demeaning ways. Some of the school textbook contents are based on how to pick on demeaning physical characteristics of women in order to avoid sleeping with women if men are to free themselves from worldly attachments³⁹. These contents must have been taken from some religious teachings written by men in the past and targeted for men who wanted to renounce worldly possessions and enter religious practice but were finding it difficult to do so. These messages are taken out of context, twisted and used to suit the ill purposes of men in general. However, the government has the responsibility of screening what is appropriate while preparing course materials for students. Such unwanted knowledge hurts the feelings of women and instils a false sense of superiority for men over women.

One belief that is strongly ingrained in society is the belief that women are inferior to men by Kerap Ghu 'nine noble births or nine rebirth'. This has been accepted and unquestioned over the years and is recorded in the Bhutan Report to the CEDAW (2004:10). However, the Constitution of Bhutan (2008) strongly refutes any such claims and all men and women are to be considered

³⁸ All these beliefs are beliefs that have been passed on verbally from old Buddhist teachings but have not been recorded in modern literature. Thus, even if the beliefs are ingrained and practised widely in society so strongly, there is no evidence to back up such claims.

³⁹ I remember the Dzongkha (Bhutanese Language) textbook titled 'Shetring' in my higher secondary school had a chapter on women and goes on to explain that women have nine holes in their bodies and from that nine holes come out all nauseating discharges and thus contact with women must be avoided because women are dirty.

equal in the eyes of law. This inferiority belief permeates through the whole society but educated women have now started questioning it. For example, a consequence of such belief is seen in the fact that women normally refrained from killing snakes because of their inferior position to men. This is because of the belief that a snake that dies in the hands of a woman will never have the opportunity of being reincarnated as a human being, a step that is closest to attaining nirvana and attaining Buddha hood.

Such beliefs however do not seem to interfere with sharing work responsibilities such as farming, decision making, property inheritance and women's participation in community activities. Their invisible presence is however felt in the low number of women's participation in important public decision-making gatherings, household representation at district meetings, women's role during religious rites and dos and don'ts that women have to follow visiting temples and behaviour in front of religious people. In some cases, I have observed that even clothes of men and women were segregated and washed separately.

An example of the discriminating nature of religious beliefs can be noted during religious visits to monasteries. In almost all monasteries, there is a separate room called the Goenga (Sacred Altar) where women are not allowed to enter. Women are considered to be impure because of menstruation and not fit to be admitted inside the rooms meant exclusively for men. I made several visits to monasteries in Bhutan but everywhere women were barred from entering the Goenga. Women themselves felt that they were inferior to men both in terms of birth and physical and intellectual capabilities.

Traditional Practices

One cannot say what it was like for Bhutan in the olden days because of lack of records. However, few written materials that are available did not speak highly about Bhutanese women's conditions. For example, Samuel Davis who visited Bhutan as a part of British mission to Bhutan in 1783 described women in a pitiable condition. However, it can be argued that Davis's account of Bhutanese women in those days cannot be relied upon fully since it was based on observation as a passerby who was in the country for a very short period⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ In contrast, even though there is a considerable time gap, Aris (1994) writes about women towards the end of Deb Rajas rule and beginning of monarchy in 1907, who were much loved and played important and influential role in

It was a time when modern education was never heard of and only men were educated through monasteries:

“I believe the women in no part of the world treated worse than in Boutan (sic) they seem just tolerated for the indispensable purpose of propagation, and for the labour they can be brought to undergo. In the latter (sic) every degree of age and condition is kept constantly engaged, from the child who has just acquired strength to support itself, to the matron who totters with age. The former are seen trudging with their little loaded baskets, and the latter seldom get rid of theirs till death releases them from the burthen (sic). The superior class of the natives are bound by the most solemn injunctions of religion to hold no intercourse with the women, but on the contrary to shun them as objects of mortification and abhorrence” (Aris, 1982:46-470).

In modern times, the majority of the rural women are illiterate (59.53%) and some are school dropouts who do not even complete primary schooling (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005:253). Most of the women, especially in the western part of Bhutan own their own land inherited through a matrilineal system of inheritance. In spite of this advantage over men where women do not have to depend on men for economic support, traditional practices have always perceived women as weaker of the two sexes. This belief is associated with physical weaknesses connected through biological functions (Bhutan Report to CEDAW, 2004:10). Women need more care and protection because of their sexual vulnerabilities. Because of women’s physical weaknesses and sexual vulnerabilities, women are comparatively disadvantaged, as women have to bear the responsibilities of being child-bearers, caregivers and homemakers. Such responsibilities confine women to their homes and limit their mobility outside their community.

In the village where I interviewed participants, some women admitted that such situations exist not as a deliberate intention to subjugate and confine women but as a part of life that cannot be avoided. A 61-year-old woman explained the feeling:

“Because of our age old beliefs I do feel we are inferior to men and it is not the men who force us to feel that way”.

shaping Bhutanese history. For example, the mother of the first king, Pema Chokyi in the 1880s was instrumental in getting the enemies of her son killed by breaking her own oath of allegiance to the enemy and paving the way for her son in becoming the Kingdom’s first Monarch. The king’s wife, Ashi Lemo was also a much-loved figure in the king’s life.

This statement reinforces Moser's (1993) argument that women's 'self worth' must be included in development policies to be able to determine the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally as a part of empowerment.

Another woman felt that she was not taking any extra responsibilities even though she did not have much free time for herself:

"Occasionally, my husband does baby sit when it becomes hard for women to work and babysit at the same time. But I do not feel that I am doing extra work because our men do work that needs more physical strength even though women are always on their feet doing one work or the other. I do not get much free time".

Few women also felt that men suffered from a sense of insecurity to let their women go out of their community in the sense that their women might be vulnerable to dangers and temptations. Men enjoyed freedom from restricting responsibilities and as a result, women depend more and more on their men to venture to areas which are beyond the reach of women. With men away from home, the internal management of family resources and activities also become part of women's work besides cooking, laundry, animal care, firewood collection, fetching water, or entertaining guests. Men would do these chores only if there was labour shortage at home.

This situation can be identified with Moser's identification of women's triple role in the community, reproductive work of giving birth, productive for household consumption and community work of participating in community activities discussed in chapter 2. This challenges CEDAW's report that "*no distinct division of roles is apparent between the majority of rural women and men*" (Bhutan Report to CEDAW, 2004:11). Even though men are assigned the role of provider for families, it is not only the men who provide for the family but women are also productive members though not recognized in monetary terms.

In some instances, the traditional practice of sexual division of labour is more pronounced. Men I interviewed were very adamant against carrying manures simply because they were produced from animal dung. Men considered it derogatory and women themselves admitted that they had no problem handling manure as it had always been apart of their work. Sonam Kinga (2002) reported that in eastern part of Bhutan men and women shared the work of manure application

and in corners of the country, there were places where men handled manure and women refused to touch it. A 61-year-old woman has this to say:

“Spreading manure is done by women because it is considered dirty for men and because of our age old beliefs I do feel we are inferior to men”.

Another 54-year-old man said this:

“Women do manure work because they are inferior to men and cannot plough because only men are allowed to do that according to our tradition and beliefs”.

One man thought there was no harm in doing the same work as women but he was more concerned about losing his respect in society. He said:

“I think, men can do manure spreading but men might look inferior to women in the eyes of society”.

Another influential man in the village thought these practices were followed because everyone thought women were inferior. He himself gave me the impression that he did not think women were inferior but was unwilling to admit this in front of his peers. He elaborated on the beliefs of women’s inferior position:

“Work at the farm and household is same everywhere here in the village. But spreading manure is still done by women and is seen as unfit for men. There are some other things like women are not allowed to touch dead bodies because they are deemed inferior”.

Many women acknowledged that outdoor work is more laborious and difficult and they would have been lost without men in the house. Both men and women also felt that outdoor work had more value and productivity even though many men admitted that women did more work and suffer more (Bhutan Report to CEDAW, 2004:27). For example, a 50-year-old man with two wives responded:

“I feel I do not need to help my women because I think it is their responsibility to take care of children and do extra domestic work. I try to help as much as possible with child rearing but if the baby cries at night, then I can hardly help because I concentrate on sleeping”

Domestic Violence and Sexual crimes

Most of the domestic violence and sexual crimes remained submerged within the household. This is because most society in developing countries sees domestic violence as an internal issue that can be solved within the four walls of the house. Some societies even see it as legitimate use of force for men to control women.

Naila Kabeer suggests that domestic violence remain submerged because:

“deep rooted beliefs about the sanctity and safety of the domestic sphere, the shame and blame that often attach to women who are beaten, and the male biases of most development agencies have long combined to ensure that this was an issue largely characterised by silence and non decision-making” (Kabeer, 1994:233).

Around a decade ago, domestic violence in Bhutan was hardly an issue. It is not that domestic violence did not exist but victims were unwilling to come forward. The legal system did not provide enough protection for women against domestic violence and sexual crimes. Women mostly were dependent on men for basic needs and did not have financial independence to leave their husbands. In some cases, men got away lightly with the lenient legal system and women feared reprisal. With the amendment in laws providing severe punishment and hefty fines for such crimes, women now have started coming forward seeking legal justice.

According to a study conducted by *Kuensel*, the national newspaper of Bhutan in which it examined court cases, domestic violence against women and sexual crimes have been on the rise at an alarming rate. What was more disturbing was the rape of minors, which was unheard of not so long ago. The study was conducted for the period between 1997 to 2007. This is in contrast with data collected over a period of 12 years between 1986 and 1998. In 1986, only 14 cases or rapes were reported whereas there were only 15 cases in 1998 (Kinga, 2002:21). The Table below gives us an idea about the numbers of sexual crimes reported.

Table 12: Details of Sexual Offences, Bhutan, 2001-2006

Details	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Rape	16	13	15	18	14	33
Attempted Rape	8	12	10	13	13	11
Molestation	5	1	2	4	3	5
Elopement	23	14	15	7	17	9
Sexual Harassment	0	0	0	0	5	3
Un-natural offence	3	0	0	3	1	1
Prostitution	2	2	2	3	2	2
Rape of married person	0	0	0	0	1	3
Statutory rape	0	0	0	0	1	4
Bestiality	0	0	0		0	1
Total	57	42	44	48	57	72

Source: RGOB and NSB (2007:196).

The new *Kuensel* report⁴¹ found that there were 28 cases of rape in 2005 and 48 cases in 2007. Most of the literate participants did agree that sexual harassment exists almost everywhere but is more rampant in the lower grades and lessens as women rise up to more important positions. Many of the participants had also heard of sexual harassment but they believed only a few were reported because of social embarrassment and reprisals. This could explain the low level of sexual harassment reports in the government record even though, the contrary that it is a sign of peace in the country is provided as an explanation.

According to the Chief Justice, the rise in number of sexual crimes reported can be attributed to more awareness programmes by the government and police:

“Factors like more legal awareness, better accessibility, friendlier courts, more empowerment to the people, better statistical reporting and detection by the police are responsible for the high number of these cases coming to court,” (Tenzing Lamsang⁴², *Kuenselonline*, 12th April 2008).

339 cases of domestic violence were registered with the forensic department in the main hospital in the capital in 2008 (Sonam Pelden⁴³, *Kuenselonline*, 9th March 2009). The main hospital is reported to be seeing at least four cases of domestic violence in a day in the capital itself, a disturbing figure for a small population. Many other sexual harassments are believed to be committed rampantly both at work places and home but there is no statistical evidence to prove it. Work place sexual harassments go unreported because women are afraid of losing their jobs. In the villages, visiting officials are said to demand sexual services from young village girls. A NCWC Report confirms that:

“in rural areas many people say they perceive the need to provide dancing girls to entertain in villages as a form of harassment” (Planning Commission, NCWC and RGOB, 2007:54).

This was because it was considered a part of local hospitality for young village girls to entertain officials with dances and songs. However, the girls end up sleeping with these men and as a result there maybe a serious problem for women both to their reputations and lives. These short-term relationships sometimes land women into trouble when they get impregnated and the men refuse to acknowledge the relationship later on. However, even such incidents cannot be proved

⁴¹ A study conducted by Kuensel Corporation, Bhutan over a period of 10 years from 1997 to 2007 in 20 Districts.

⁴² Tenzing Lamsang is a male Bhutanese Reporter with Kuensel, the national News paper.

⁴³ Sonam Pelden is a woman reporter for Kuensel.

for lack of research and data. One woman I interviewed in the village spoke about the government official visits and their demands:

“Earlier, whenever there was official visit from the government, schoolgirls were asked to provide sexual services to the visitors and many girls had to drop out of school because of that”.

On the other hand, working women in urban areas experienced sexual harassment at a different level. Almost all the participants felt there was sexual tension at work but it was not discussed openly. One participant said that most women were asked to provide sexual favours to their bosses in order to get promotions. Sexual harassment was thought to be more prevalent in the lower grades and decreased as women rose to higher positions. One woman who worked for the United Nations said:

“I believe for women to rise in position, women need to provide some kind of sexual favours to their bosses. Some women need to be girlfriends for their bosses to be looked on favourably. This is true for most women in lower grades and do not have the capacity to stand up for themselves. But it becomes more difficult if the woman is better qualified and is in a significant position. Men seem to fear empowered women”.

Many participants thought that even though sexual harassment was rampant, many cases go unreported for fear of reprisal and social embarrassment. Very few said they have not heard of such cases. Mostly women strongly agreed that sexual harassment existed almost everywhere. Participants (men) talked about it openly but were less willing to talk about it when it came to writing down and quoting them about it.

Legal Status and Women

The constitution of Bhutan (2008) provides Bhutanese citizens with equal access and opportunity to join the public service and vote. Another important point made in the constitution is the reinforcement that the state should take responsibility to respond appropriately to eliminate discrimination against women both in the public and private sphere (Article 9, sec 17). However, some of the legal acts that are in force have been enacted and amended before the Constitution came into force. No new amendments have taken place to adjust legal rules to conform to the new Constitution.

Some of the legal acts relating to inheritance, sexual harassments and marriage have already been discussed in this chapter. One important subject in a legal act that needs to be discussed is the citizenship act. Even though the citizenship article in the new constitution (2008) discusses who gets to the right to Bhutanese citizenship and seems to represent fair policies, the Bhutan Report to CEDAW (2004) discusses the rights in more detail. According to the report, children of Bhutanese fathers and expatriate mothers have Bhutanese citizenship, however, children of Bhutanese mothers and expatriate fathers are not entitled for citizenship but were permitted to live in Bhutan under a '*special residence*' permit to those who were married before the 1985 Act came into force (Bhutan Report to CEDAW, 2004:21-22). This is in contrast to a largely matrilineal society in Bhutan where the legal act intervenes to establish government's patriarchal position.

Another point to be noted is that the Constitution itself is biased when it came to pass the crown to a successor. Article 2, section 3, subsection b, under the heading '*Institution of Monarchy*' states that succession should:

"Pass by hereditary succession to the direct lineal descendants on the abdication or demise of the Druk Gyalpo, in order of seniority, with a prince taking precedence over a princess, subject to the requirement that, in the event of shortcomings in the elder prince, it shall be the sacred duty of the Druk Gyalpo to select and proclaim the most capable prince or princess as heir to the Throne".

It is clear that patriarchal value is reinforced here. Having said that, it cannot be denied that the very step taken to include women as successors is a bold break from tradition and is also a sign of a change that is taking place at a fast pace. Even in a country like Japan, despite being one of the most developed countries some find it hard to accept a woman as a successor to their chrysanthemum throne (debated widely in the media) and Bhutan should be applauded for being able to accept change in such a short period.

Marriages Act (1980)

The legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years for both sexes (Marriage Act, 1980). However, many marriages in villages take place at a very young age. Some get married as young as 15 and some even younger. Many live together after women become pregnant through night hunting adventures and getting involved in unprotected sex. Parents can either arrange marriages or leave

it to their children to choose their own partners. Child marriages and incestuous relationships are prohibited by law (Marriage Act of Bhutan, 1980). However, in some communities, cousin marriages are quite common and such relations ensure that family wealth and property does not leave the family network. Marriages are also used as a means to exchange labour between families (Bhutan report to the CEDAW Committee, 2006:10). In western Bhutan, sons leave their family home and reside with the wives. In turn, son-in laws replace the outgoing sons and the aging parents. This is practised in my village in western Bhutan where I come from.

In the role of child bearers, many women lament the fact that they were born women. Childbearing responsibilities are seen as unfortunate and inescapable because of the risk it carried to a woman's body and the responsibilities associated with childbirth. The risks of having unwanted pregnancies and illegitimate children are also very high as pre marital sex is very common. Pre marital sex is quite common and is mostly practised through a popular practice called 'night-hunting'⁴⁴. Pre marital sex is not a taboo in most of Bhutanese society but this practice works against women and restricts women's mobility when women finally bear the brunt of such practices when they become single parents. Unfortunately, no figures are available for children born through 'night-hunting' activities. Sexual education is yet to make an impact and such unwanted attention is a threat to women's social status and reputation.

Kinga (2002) suggested that polyandry existed in Bhutan at a very negligible scale, whereas polygamy is more common. In the case of a woman having two husbands, the woman is looked up for her management ability whereas the husbands sharing wives are rebuked harshly. Cases of polygamy are reported to be more common among the nomadic herders in the north and southern Bhutan. Polygamy is looked on more favourably whereas polyandry is seen as inconceivable. The refusal by the legal system to issue more than one marriage certificate to women while men are permitted to have more than one wife has legally approved polygamy. The underlying patriarchal values still exist. Whereas Boserup (1970) described gender relations in polygamous society as outcomes of a complex web of economic, institutional and social factors such as race, caste and status interlinked with cultural and religious values, the rare Bhutanese polygamous situation seems to arise out of need for extra labour in the rural areas. For example, one household I interviewed in the village had one husband and two wives. While one wife took

⁴⁴ Night hunting is a practice where men secretly visit women at night with or without previous consent.

charge of all household activities, the other wife took care of all women's work outside home and helped the husband. However, polygamists exist at a negligible rate and it is not influenced by any religious and cultural values.

There is no serious stigma attached to remarriages and divorces can be filed by men and women. The 1996 Amendment of the 1980 Marriage Act releases the custody of a child who is nine years and below to the mother irrespective of who is at fault. The husband is required to pay 20% of his income as compensation to bring up the child until the child attains the age of 18. On the other hand, the wife does not need to pay any compensation if the father takes over the custody of the child. However, the legal requirement of handing over a child of 9 years and below into the custody of the mother reinforces the role of women as homemakers and her role as a caregiver until the child grows up. This situation limits the woman's mobility to venture out of her home and participate in income generating activities. Even here, the patriarchal value is indirectly reinforced.

Media Effects

Bhutan noted a significant change in the role of media from 2003 to 2008. Earlier, they were seen as a medium to transmit information. Now they are seen more as a form of entertainment (Sonam Pelden⁴⁵, Kuensel online, 14th January 2009). The biggest effect on Bhutanese lives was caused by the introduction of television on June 2nd, 1999, coinciding with the fourth king's Silver Jubilee celebration on the throne. Especially the effect on women was far greater than anticipated. Women were now seen postponing their household chores and watching television late into the night. Earlier, families in Bhutan had their meals together and they were used for family communication and to spend quality time together. Because of repeated advertisements, Bhutanese are reportedly more influenced in buying more goods such as kitchen appliances, cosmetics, cars, clothes and high-tech electronics. Rapten reported that most of the females changed their concept of love, beauty and lifestyle images.

⁴⁵ Sonam Pelden is a Reporter with the newspaper of Bhutan, Kuensel

Things once considered an item of luxury have become a necessity in modern times (Rapten, no date: 184-186).

As De Casanova argues:

“Concerns about adolescent behaviour and self-image are often premised on the idea that young people are somehow more impressionable or less sophisticated media consumers than adults. Idealized images of beautiful women are a major factor affecting young women’s personal ideas and body image; other influential factors include peers and family and the perceived preferences of the opposite sex. It could be said that the media are the most important deterrents of abstract ideas of beauty, whereas self-concept and judgments of the attractiveness of real-life women allow for greater influence from the individual personality and social context” (Erynn Masi de Casanova, 2004:289).

The impact of the media is also different on the urban and rural areas. Most rural areas do not have access to television and even radios are items of luxury for the poor rural people. Because of lack of visual effect and the language barrier due to their illiteracy, the impact on rural area is far less than the urban areas. In the urban areas, media is the culprit for encouraging:

“western lifestyles of conspicuous consumption, erosion of native values and languages and changed their interactions between family and neighbours. It also allowed foreign culture to penetrate and influence traditional cultural practices. Although its impact at the moment is marginal, it may increase over the years” (Rapten, no date: 192-193).

Men often fear the impact media and development has on women. Fifty years ago, women stayed home, raised children and took care of their men. Today, women’s own stance for independence in the changing economy has these roles reversed. Many women have become bread suppliers and financial providers to their families. Men feel that their masculinity is threatened if their employment is threatened by women. Their role as a traditional provider for the family is threatened. Greenstein suggests that women working outside home even create marital disruptions. He wrote:

“The so-called absence effect argues that employment outside the home takes the wife away from her traditional homemaking responsibilities, with possible effects of increasing stress and conflict within the marriage” (Greenstein, 1995: 31).

Concerns of CEDAW Committee⁴⁶

Ever since Bhutan became a member of the CEDAW committee in 1981, Bhutan is required to submit development reports on Bhutanese women to the Committee. The CEDAW committee on the other hand provides its own appraisal response and feedback on the report. In their response, the committee reported that it was appreciative of the fact that Bhutan accepted CEDAW policies without any reservations and at the same time was taking consistent steps to fulfil its obligations to the convention through establishment of organizations such as NWAB, NCWC, RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) that monitored the implementation of the convention. The committee also commended Bhutan on its significant progress in terms of adopting various pieces of legislation such as the acts on inheritance and marriage that guaranteed equal rights for women to inherit properties and protected women from sexual abuse. The committee was further appreciative about the impressive number of girls' enrolment in schools, which accounted for 47% of the total enrolment (CEDAW Committee, New York, 2004).

However, the committee reported concerns about the wide gender gap at tertiary level of schooling, at decision-making levels, lack of national machinery to advance women and gender neutral policies and made several recommendations to improve the existing situation. Most of the recommendations such as including principles of equality between men and women in the constitution have already been incorporated in the new constitution of Bhutan of 2008. In my opinion, the most important recommendation was the collection of gender-disaggregated data and the commitment to make it mandatory. Insufficient data over a long period has made it difficult for researchers to make comparisons in terms of gender related progress in the development process. The fast economic development process in the 1960s prompted the government to set up a separate department known as the CSO (Central Statistical Office) in 1971 to provide reliable and timely socio economic data. This Centre has now obtained autonomous status and has been renamed NSB (National Statistical Board). However, it was only after the membership of CEDAW after 1981 that gender-disaggregated data slowly made its way into the national socio economic statistics.

⁴⁶ The report by CEDAW committee is a critical response from the CEDAW international organization in New York in response to the report submitted to the Committee by the government of Bhutan on the situation of Bhutanese women in 2004

Summary

Compared to women in most developing countries, Bhutanese women seem to fare better in many areas such as inheritance, access to education, financial control, decision-making and gender division of labour. Even for family planning, Bhutanese men participate in large numbers thus relieving women from the burden of childcare and motherhood that takes up most of women's lives by being able to limit family size. However, many religious and traditional beliefs render women inferior to men.

The biggest challenge for the Bhutan government is to make an effort to eradicate all forms of beliefs and practices that disempower women and obstruct their development. People must challenge religious beliefs such as men's superiority over women that subjugate and demean women, affecting their confidence. Some changes in the legal acts are called for in issues such as custody rights of children below nine years to be given to the mother. Such rights restrict women's mobility.

The government of Bhutan in its constitution (2008) has given women equal freedom to participate in all areas of development and opportunities. However, just having it written down in the law is not good enough if women continue to be marginalised by cultural values and social norms. If religious beliefs in Bhutan have to erode in order to increase power for gender equality, then the very concept of GNH is at risk where cultural preservation is one of the strongest pillars. However, that does not mean everything about religion has to change. Government can make an effort to create awareness and educate the public to do away with negative cultural and religious values that are discriminating in nature. The very fact that people practice and believe in traditional and cultural values blindly is a hindrance to women's way to empowerment. Negative and positive aspects of such values are not segregated and the government does not provide a clear-cut distinction. The government's silence advocates all negative and positive aspects of traditional beliefs and cultural values. As Andrea Cornwall suggests:

"Traditional Culture' is represented as a bulwark that will maintain decency and order. And yet, 'tradition' is constantly and selectively reinvented to suit the agendas of the powerful" (Cornwell, 2006: 279).

Government through education of youths also indirectly supports women's role as homemaker. For example, the Dzongkha school textbook for class VIII (intermediate level) contains a chapter

on what qualities to look for in a wife before getting married (Dzongkha Text Book, 2008). In the textbook, a good quality of a wife is described as gentle, loving, and respectful towards the husband, adorned with old clothes, ate when every one has finished and slept when everyone has slept and being completely selfless. Such descriptions reinforce women's position as caregivers and as completely dominated by men. This type of curriculum instils gender discrimination in youth even before they reach their puberty and the government has a hand in it by producing the textbooks. Such practice defeats the very purpose of government's discrimination free policies.

(1996) have rightly pointed out that institutions themselves have gendered nature. She argues that:

“many of the official ideologies through which institutions describe themselves tend to get uncritically reproduced in social science text books, in public policy and in popular discourse” (Kabeer and Subramanian, 1996:17).

In the middle path of development, Bhutan must now try to maintain a balance between the strict conservative traditional values and the changing values in the face of rapid modernisation. These changes are inevitable once the isolated country has become a part of international organizations. Changes are bound to flow in and how the government adapts itself to such changes will determine the delicate line between modernization and preservation.

5. CONCLUSION

Discussion

In order to adhere to its underlying principle of Gross national Happiness (GNH), the Bhutan government has relied heavily on its traditional practices and religious beliefs to guide the development of this ideal. However, traditional practices tend to shape gender roles in societies and Bhutan is no different. Quite a number of reports on the situation of women in Bhutan have been presented to international organizations, such as the CEDAW Commission in New York and the national report prepared by the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) among others. All these reports claimed that there are no gender biases in Bhutan except for a '*subdued*' form of discrimination at home and work places. This thesis set out to assess these claims in the reports and to study the actual situation of women in Bhutan.

Bhutan was isolated from the rest of the world until the beginning of 1960s and the Bhutanese government was sceptical about the results of modernisation they observed elsewhere. The government saw its ability to survive through subsistence farming as a strength, which meant it did not have to industrialise as other countries had done. Bhutan used its isolation as a weapon to fight off any unwanted western intrusion into its deeply nurtured culture and religion (Priesner, 1996; Ueda, 2003).

According to Ueda (2003), there were serious reasons why Bhutan needed to abandon isolation and open up its borders for development. The first of these reasons came from the immediate threat from China's occupation of Tibet. This situation was alarming because among other issues, Tibet's had cultural similarities with Bhutan. The second threat arose from the situation of the Sino-Indian war in 1962, which was particularly disturbing because Bhutan was sandwiched between the 'two giants' and there was a possibility that Bhutan would become involved. As long as Bhutan lacked an international presence, it was vulnerable. These views convinced the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third king, to launch modernization activities in order to secure the nation's sovereignty and independence.

Bhutan traded excess rice with Tibet in exchange for salt, wool and other essential items (Basu, 1996). This traditional avenue of economic exchange was lost when Bhutan cut off all ties with Tibet. Ueda claimed that when the decision was made to close its borders and cut all political and economic ties with Tibet, Bhutan increased contact across its southern border with India. Bhutan turned to India for financial support for development and in the 1960s, it embarked on its first development projects with the launching of the first five-year economic development plan that changed the course of Bhutan's history (Ueda, 2003).

Initiating development plans however, was not enough to gain an identity in the international community. Bhutan took further steps of being recognized as an independent country by joining the United Nations in 1971 and subsequently other international organizations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Priesner, 1996). The early development plans began with building the country's infrastructure such as roads, schools and hospitals (Planning Commission, first five-year plan, 1961-1965). As Bhutan became more open to the outside world, its identity which had been based on its culture, environment and religion was being slowly infiltrated by a constant flow of western influences. Most of these influences came via mass media, such as the, mass media and through contact with the other countries through various training and study programmes (Rapten, no date; Dorji and Pek, 2007). The concept of GNH was developed to protect Bhutan's culture as a way of maintaining its own identity. This concept is based on the idea that local culture and environment can be used for sustainable development and that the general well-being of the people was more important than accumulating wealth. It was accepted that wealth can be used to enhance happiness albeit as a means to an end (Planning Commission, seventh five-year plan, 1992-1997).

The early development plans were mostly gender neutral, which concentrated on improving the infrastructure of the country. It was only in the 1980s that the development plans started including women's welfare. These included providing reproductive health care facilities for women, income generating activities and increasing their participation in the education sector. The five-year plans continued to include women's welfare with no special emphasis on any particular gender mainstreaming strategy. The gender frameworks kept shifting from '*welfare approach*' to '*poverty approach*' to '*efficiency approach*' from the sixth five-year plan to the eighth five-year plan. Eventually, it was in the ninth five-year plan (2002-2007) that

'empowerment approach' was given special importance that specifically targeted meeting women's needs and continues to do so.

Bhutan's development approach used economic development as an overarching concept and also as a means to achieve general well-being and happiness through the use of less quantifiable objectives such as emotional well-being and culture. Few western approaches to development recognise the need to value culture as an intrinsic principle of development. Priesner (1996) and Ueda (2003) elaborate on this development concept arguing that the Bhutanese GNH development concept is an integration of economic growth and culture. Ueda claimed that the west will see local culture as an obstacle to development and that the diversity of the outside world could not be accommodated into western theories of development. Thus, the Bhutanese development concept is unique in that nowhere else in the world is the maximization of happiness considered the ultimate goal of development (Ueda, 2003:10, 82).

The GNH concept was followed through in several policies: first, the local beliefs that mountains, lakes and forest are sacred and are considered the abodes of Gods and Goddess was used to protect Bhutan's environment from being degraded. For example, special permits are needed from the government to cut down trees. Secondly, the government policies on culture were introduced into the education curriculum, which helped to preserve national identity. Thirdly, Bhutanese culture was used as a guiding principle in developing a middle path between modernization and traditional practices (Ueda, 2003). For example, tourists can visit the country only through a travel agency and they are at all times assisted by tour guides so they have little influence on local culture.

An interesting point is that majority of the people seemed to have heard of the GNH concept through the radio and television but did not have any idea about what the concept meant. This was evident in my interviews in which no participants from the rural area knew the full meaning of GNH. The urban participants who were literate and had some idea of what the government's concept of happiness stood for, were of the opinion that the concept was a complicated issue that needed to be explained in simple layman's terms. Many were reluctant to express their opinions openly but with the anonymity of cyber space, literate Bhutanese people were seen having serious debate about the GNH issue. Some of the online participants noted the irony concerning

the government's idealistic GNH concept and the reality of serious problems such as the scarcity of drinking water even though the country is rich in water resources, rising drugs abuse, sexual crimes and the lack of civic sense amongst the people (see chapter two on GNH). This view that the GNH is not well understood by the people is supported by Rinzin et al (2006) in which they found that the majority of his research participants did not know the meaning of GNH but believed that culture was a way of maintaining sustainability and the country's identity.

Rinzin et al (2006) argued that Bhutan aimed at integrating culture into development through a middle path strategy by trying to maintain a balance between cultural preservation and modernization. This is evident from its development policies that try to introduce modern facilities such as electricity and communication but at the same time hold on to its cultural values and traditional beliefs. An example is the establishment of Hydro projects. These projects are constructed using expatriate labourers and using water resources and do not have much impact on the country's environment and people's way of lives. Subsistence farming and its traditional ways of life have not been disrupted by such projects but have been made more productive and sustainable. This may protect the Bhutanese cultural heritage but policy also advocates traditional and religious beliefs that directly or indirectly reinforce the subordination of women.

Priesner (1996) and Ueda (2003) agree that Bhutan is in a conflicting position where some modern development is welcomed but western influences are seen as a threat to local culture. The balancing act between cultural preservation and modern development is a daunting task. It is still an ongoing process in which there is a paternalistic structure of government whereby government policies are enforced on the people (Priesner, 1996). This has been possible because the majority of the people live in the rural areas and have little knowledge outside their immediate environment. These rural people are mostly illiterate, have almost blind faith in the government policies and believe that they are implemented for the people's benefit. This attitude is changing as people are becoming more educated. People now have a deeper understanding of the positive and negative effects that government policies may have on the community in general. With the new democratic government (March 2008) in place, people are now more likely to be consulted as to the implications of policies that may benefit the community in general and they are also aware political process becomes more liberalised and transparent.

Because of modernization and change in traditional practices, women are breaking away from their traditional roles of homemakers and they are getting an education and joining the employment sector. These changes support the drive for cultural change that encourages the rise of women into public life. For women to accomplish such major feats, they needed to overcome traditional societal norms that nearly always excluded them from public life (Stacy and Price, 1981). For instance, the impact of economic development in Bhutan has increased the number of girls enrolling in schools and has contributed to the rising rate of women in the employment sector. However, it is evident from this research that not many women have advanced beyond high school level. This in turn has affected women's participation in the employment sector, where women are mostly employed in low paid jobs and rarely reach top decision-making levels. For example, no woman has made it to the post of a Minister. However, with the introduction of democracy in Bhutan in 2008, the change seems to have worked in favour of women, for there are now women working as Members of the Parliament and as National Council Advisors in the democratically elected new parliament.

Traditional cultural attitudes have presented major obstacles to women's representation in the political and economic development processes. It is believed that in traditional societies, women themselves are reluctant to participate in political activities because of lack of support from the community (Kabeer, 2000). However, even though women have always been a part of economic development processes, their contributions have remained invisible due to the failure of quantifying women's output (Boserup, 1979). Bhutan's move to preserve culture has both empowered and disempowered Bhutanese women in many ways. Compared to women in most developing countries, Bhutanese women seem to fare better in many areas such as inheritance, access to education, financial control, decision-making and gender division of labour. This study shows that Bhutanese men's major engagement in women's affairs such as their significant contribution in family planning programmes has helped relieve some of the reproductive burdens borne by women. Nevertheless, many religious and traditional beliefs still render women inferior to men. For instance, Buddhist beliefs render women inferior to men by 'nine noble births' (see chapter four on religious beliefs). Some of the government policies such as The Citizenship Act (1985) and The Marriage Act (1980) continue to be biased. Children born to expatriate fathers and Bhutanese mothers are denied Bhutanese citizenship whereas children with Bhutanese

fathers and expatriate mothers are granted Bhutanese citizenship. The Marriage Act also grants exclusive custody of children below nine years to the mothers. This confines women to their homes as mothers and caregivers thus limiting their access to better and alternative employment opportunities. The Inheritance Act (1980) limited women's mobility as they spend their lives caring for elderly parents and looking after property, yet at the same time this gave them a sense of security and independence because women did not have to depend on their husbands for economic support.

This research and analysis has found that there are many reasons for women to shy away from seeking employment. Issues such as sexual harassment at work places, cultural influences and traditional practices, and perceptions that women are not technologically capable and are best suited to care-giving and housekeeping type roles are some of the factors hindering real gender-equality for women in Bhutan. This research has also found that a major reason for women being disadvantaged in Bhutan is the fact that there are no female role models because of lack of female representatives in higher authority. This reinforces the idea that women do not need a higher level of education or can do just as well if they stay at home as homemakers.

In order for Bhutan to achieve real cultural and economic progress, the Bhutan government has to provide gender equality and increase happiness and general well-being of the whole population. The wide gender gaps in the employment sector and gender disparity in education especially in the higher level of education, illustrate the government's need to accelerate the rate of change to the cultural and traditional perceptions that shape the way Bhutanese women are regarded. Educating the population about the importance of women's role in the development process, information through the mass media about the negative affects of some of the cultural and traditional practices and highlighting the importance of education for women would go a long way to alleviating the existing gender inequality. Information and education needs to be available to all Bhutanese, not only those in urban areas but especially in the rural areas where most of the population live. Education for women needs to be improved with proper educational infrastructures such as good boarding facilities so that girls will not have to travel long distances to schools, good transportation facilities and an increase in the number of schools within local communities. Other than the government, other organizations such as the NGOs and the public itself are starting to push the government for reforms that can improve the quality of life for

women and will need to continue to do so. Gross National Happiness will not be achieved if women (who compose of almost half the Bhutanese population) are left out of development programmes.

In its constitution of 2008, the government of Bhutan has decreed that women be given equal freedom to participate in all areas of development and opportunities. However, just having it written down in the law is not good enough if women continue to be marginalised by cultural values and social norms. If religious beliefs in Bhutan have to change in order to increase power for gender equality, then the very concept of GNH needs to be dynamic and reflexive enough to accommodate the needs of women. That does not mean everything about religion has to change. The government can make an effort to create awareness and educate the public to do away with negative cultural and religious values that are by nature, discriminatory. The very fact that people are not consciously thinking about gender equality as they practice traditional values and cultural norms can be a hindrance to progress, equality and empowerment for women. Negative and positive aspects of such values are not segregated and the government does not provide a clear-cut distinction. The government's silence advocates all negative and positive aspects of traditional beliefs and cultural values.

Limitations

This thesis has to a great extent relied on Bhutanese government and academic sources which are limited, especially outside Bhutan. There is so far no targeted research on the effect of culture on Bhutanese women. However, recent research by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, an autonomous agency, has concentrated on the impact of Gross National Happiness on development (www.cbs.com.bt). The results of these various research projects have been available only towards the end of writing my thesis and unfortunately I was not able to take advantage of them. In future researches, I would like to set aside more time so that I am able to analyse my findings in more depth. This shortage of time has been a disadvantage this time because I have been based in Christchurch for most of the time I have been working on my thesis, and my period of fieldwork was brief. This has resulted in less detailed data from the urban participants. There was a lack of direct human communication with the urban participants due to lack of face-to-face interviews even though the process went well with the rural participants. The urban participants

cited lack of time as a reason for not being able to sit for an interview. This however, made me wonder if the participants thought the questions were culturally and politically too sensitive or they had reservations about talking about government policies openly. The lack of data on religious divisions and regional ethnicity was a setback in grasping wider range of opinions from other research and analysing census data. Because of lack of past researches and data, the analysis of relation between gender, culture and development is made within the restrictions of the limited resources available.

Further Areas of Research

The Centre for Bhutan Studies has recently launched several programmes of research work in many areas of GNH such as implications of GNH for economic development, media influence, and the link between culture and GNH. However, there have been hardly any researches on more sensitive issues such as the implication of GNH for gender issues and independent research by individuals on the gender position in Bhutan. It is my hope that this research will be just a beginning to further in-depth analysis of gender issues in Bhutan that can be debated as a part of Gross National Happiness conferences both at local and international level. It is a primary objective of this thesis that the Bhutan government takes the necessary steps to make amendments to the various Acts within the Bhutanese constitution that presently discriminate against women.

My further areas of research interests lie in exploring the impacts of alcohol addiction, the cultural practice of 'night hunting', domestic violence and sexual crimes on women, all of which, to date, have not been researched. However, the sensitivity of cultural and political issues cannot be ignored when areas of research touch upon subjects that Bhutanese have been reluctant to talk about openly, especially topics that revolve around government policies and GNH. Meantime, as the inevitable modernisation floods over Bhutan, how successful the Bhutan government will be in holding steadfast to its ideals of promoting Gross National Happiness remains to be seen.

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⁴⁷ For some reason, there is an overlapping period in the eighth and ninth five-year plans. Probably some unfinished projects in the eighth five-year plan must have been carried forward to the ninth plan.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 : General School Curricula and Activities

x: refers to learning areas with specific subjects and periods set in the timetable

y: refers to learning areas addressed in co-curricular programmes and school organizations

Area	Subjects	PP	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Language	Dzongkha	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Rigzhung ⁴⁸												x	x
	English	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	English Literature												x	x
Mathematics	Mathematic	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Business Mathematics												x	x
Science and Technology	Science					x	x	x	x	x				
	Physics										x	x	x	x
	Chemistry										x	x	x	x
	Biology										x	x	x	x
	Computer Applications										x	x		
	Computer Science												x	x
Human Society and Environment	Environmental Studies	x	x	x										
	Social Studies				x	x	x							
	History							x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Geography							x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Commercial studies										x	x		
	Commerce												x	x
	Accounting												x	x
	Economics										x	x	x	x
Creative and Practical Arts	Visual Arts and Crafts	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
	Songs, Dances and Music	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
Health, Physical Education and Personal Development	Health and population Education					y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
	Games and sports	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
	Moral and Value Education	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Scouts				y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
Socially Useful and productive Work	Agriculture and Social Forestry	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
	SUPW										y	y	y	y
	Basic Vocational Skills								y	y	y	y	y	y

Note: PP (Pre Primary) to Year VI is Primary Education, Year VII, VII is Lower Secondary Level, Year IX, X is Middle Secondary Level and Year XI, and XII is Higher Secondary Level.

Source: Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education (2006:9)

⁴⁸ Rigzhung is the study of Bhutanese art, culture, grammar and other Bhutanese mainstream studies.

Appendix 2: Interview questions during the field work.

1. What is Gross National Happiness?
2. Do you think Bhutanese culture empower or disempower women?
3. Who has greater financial and decision-making control in the house, husband or wife?
4. What is the division of work like in your household like?
5. Are women paid equal wages as men for same kind of work? And do men and women share equal status?
6. Is there sexual tension at work?
7. If you could afford to educate only one child, which would that be, boy or girl?
8. If you are to have only one child, which one would you prefer to have, boy or girl?
9. Do you think it is important to educate women?
10. Do you think our government is providing enough health facilities? And do men take part in family planning procedures?
11. What is the most important thing in your life?

Appendix 3: Glossary

Desis

Temporal rulers before monarchy

Dzongkha

National Language

Dzongkhag

District

Gewog

Block

Goenga

Sacred Altar

REWA

Bhutanese word for hope

Appendix 4: Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BBE	Bhutan Board of Examinations
BBS	Bhutan Broadcasting Service
BDFC	Bhutan Development Finance Corporation
BHU	Basic Health Unit
CEDAW	Commission for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
DYT	Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NCWC	National Commission for Women & Children
NWAB	National Women's Association of Bhutan
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women
WB	World Bank

Appendix 5: Women at work in Bhutan

Photographs by the author in December 2007 during the fieldwork for this thesis

Picture 1. Women loading manure



Picture 2. A typical Bhutanese village



Picture 3. Women gathering firewood



Appendix 5: University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee Letter of Approval

Ref: HEC 2007/157

4 June 2008

Tshering Yangden
School of Sociology & Anthropology
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Tshering

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal “Status of Women in Bhutan under the Gross National Happiness Development Scheme” has been considered and approved.

However this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 27 May 2008.

Yours sincerely

Dr Michael Grimshaw
Chair, Human Ethics Committee